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Peace and Development Efforts in Afghanistan: A Lost Decade

When international intervention put an end to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in late 2001 thousands of Afghans went out to the streets to celebrate a new beginning. After 20 years of bloody civil wars in the country, many had hoped that a new era of stability and prosperity was about to begin. The devastating terrorist attacks in the U.S., which brought the international coalition to Afghanistan, was seen as a guarantee that the West would not abandon the country before it was put back in order. Afghanistan could have been a model of post-conflict reconstruction.

After 10 years of international engagement in Afghanistan, it is clear that those hopes didn't turn out to be true. The last 10 years have been mainly lost in terms of peace and the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Important questions to be asked are whether this grim outcome could have been prevented, if the intervention could have been done differently, what went wrong, and what lessons can be drawn for the future of Afghanistan and other similar post-conflict situations. When world leaders gather in Bonn to discuss a better strategy for Afghanistan it will be a good moment to re-assess those dilemmas. This paper aims to bring some proposals for answers to those questions.

Peace and Development

Peace is intrinsically intertwined with development. It is not by mere coincidence that the list of the most fragile states overlaps the list of the least developed. Poor countries lead also in the rankings of most corrupt states and those with the worst governance. The "conflict trap" as described by Paul Collier, hampers growth and makes the poorest countries prone to renewing violence¹. People left without the chance to realize their

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¹ Paul Collier, *The Bottom Billion: Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can Be Done About It*, Oxford 2008.

potential in a normal way often seek to improve their status by illegal means. Poverty feeds violence, criminality, drug trade and terrorism. The poorest countries often engage in wars and conflicts. Wars make them poor. The facts and numbers are appalling.

According to the World Bank, “one-and-half billion people live in areas affected by fragility, conflict or large-scale violence and no low-income fragile or conflict-affected country has yet to achieve a single Millennium Development Goal”. Moreover, “90 percent of the last decade’s civil wars occurred in countries that had already had a civil war in the last 30 years” [...] and “youth unemployment is consistently cited in citizen perception surveys as a motive for joining both rebel movements and urban gangs”.² This means that to break this vicious cycle any successful international intervention must combine both military and development components. This awareness has been on the rise recently.

Since the UNDP introduced the concept of “human security” in 1994, and the UN Millennium Declaration of 2000 reinvigorated the development agenda, peace was more often seen in the prism of development. In the words of the UN Secretary General, “a world in which billions are suffering from poverty, hunger, illiteracy and disease, and which is not advancing down the road of development, will not be a world at peace”.³ Peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction strategies as well as proper humanitarian emergency responses (such as the LRRD concept—Linking Relief, Rehabilitation and Development) stresses the importance of economic recovery as an essential condition for long-term stability.

Development cooperation has become a pillar of the external policy of the European Union, which itself is the biggest donor of development aid. In 2010, along with defence and diplomacy, development was included for the first time in the National Security Strategy as a key pillar of U.S. national security. Clearly recognizing the importance of development aid, President Barack Obama at the UN Summit in September 2010 said: “In our global economy, progress in even the poorest countries can advance the prosperity and security of people far beyond their borders, including my fellow Americans”. Afghanistan offered an excellent opportunity to test this security-development approach.

Security on the Cheap

Mismanagement of the Afghan security sector by the international community is a fundamental reason for the country’s current instability and chaos. Twenty years of fighting with the Red Army or in civil wars left the country in ruins. For most of this time the state didn’t function and its authority didn’t expand much beyond Kabul. The fragmented country desperately needed “imported security”. Unfortunately, this was not in adequate supply in the world. Many experts have pointed to three strategic mistakes made by foreign actors

² *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development*, The World Bank, Washington D.C., pp. 1, 2, 6.

³ Secretary-General Kofi Annan, “Remarks to the annual United Nations parliamentary hearing of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)”, Press Release SG/SM/8965, New York, 27 October 2003.

who were attempting to improve security in Afghanistan: too light a footprint, a diversion of resources and confusion about regional circumstances.

Light Footprint

Several hundred U.S. soldiers engaged in the intervention in Afghanistan in 2001 were enough to topple the Taliban regime and win the war but were too few to sustain the peace. In the first crucial years of transition, the presence of international forces in the country was minimal (see Appendix: Figure 1). In April 2003, there were fewer than 10,000 American and 5,000 other foreign troops in the country.⁴ The number of American soldiers was over 20,000 in February 2006, then more than doubled from 32,000 to 65,000 only between January 2009 and January 2010. With the additional “surge” ordered by President Obama in 2009, that number reached almost 100,000 by the middle of 2010. International troops started their build-up only in 2004, crossing more than 40,000 in 2010, after the Afghan insurgency was in full swing. This was nowhere close to the military presence in the smaller and less-populous Iraq. In terms of soldiers per capita, the number of international forces was very modest compared to other peace-keeping missions. Moreover, serious efforts to establish capable Afghan national forces started only in 2007 (see Appendix: Figure 2) and were done with haste, compromising quality over the quantity of troops.⁵ The build-up of National Police was even more neglected and policemen have become a part of the problem rather than the solution.⁶

This initial ignorance of the question of security created a power vacuum and constituted a weak foundation for civilian state-building. The U.S. approach, described by some as a “warlord strategy”⁷ because of its dependence on local militias for intelligence and protection, has only institutionalized the fragmentation of the country into several regional fiefdoms, undermined the government and contributed to the development of an illegal economy and corruption. The president of Afghanistan, lacking credible forces of his own, was effectively limited to the function of “governor of Kabul”. When the security sector started to expand significantly after 2006 it was just too late. The window of opportunity for Afghanistan had already closed. One can wonder what would have happened if NATO troops had been deployed with decisive force to Afghanistan since 2002 and whether they would have lost fewer soldiers than they did by expanding their presence only after the security situation collapsed in 2005.

Even though the initial reluctance to send troops to Afghanistan was officially justified out of respect for the sovereignty of the Afghan state and an effort not to alienate

⁴ *Afghanistan Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-Taliban Afghanistan*, Brookings Institute, 29 September 2011, p. 4.

⁵ “A Force in Fragments: Reconstituting Afghan National Army”, *ICG Asia Report* No. 190, 12 May 2010.

⁶ “Policing in Afghanistan: Still Searching for a Strategy”, *ICG Asia Briefing* No 80, 18 December 2008; “Afghanistan: Exit vs. Engagement”, *ICG Asia Briefings* No 115, 28 November 2010.

⁷ Ahmed Rashid, *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, Viking Penguin, 2008.

the local population with the impression of a foreign occupation, the uncomfortable truth is that the U.S. and its allies did not have any interest in engaging seriously in Afghanistan. The aims of international intervention were described narrowly and focused on the antiterrorism campaign, not on nation-building. Had it happened to kill or capture Osama bin Laden in 2001, American troops would have been withdrawn from South Asia probably in early 2002 and the poor land-locked country under the Hindukush would have been forgotten. Americans wanted the mission in Afghanistan to be at minimal cost and maximum speed—they have paid a huge price and been stuck there for years. The failure to strengthen the rule of law and justice cost Afghanistan its most precious asset—the confidence of the society in the new government and its international allies. Providing security on the cheap didn't pay off in the end.

Diversion of Resources

The main reason behind this strategic mistake was that while Afghanistan was where the terrorist plots of 9/11 were prepared it was not the main aim of the global war on terror. The quick victory in Kabul encouraged the Bush administration to hasten preparations to intervene in Iraq. The military, financial, logistical and intelligence resources still needed in Afghanistan were eventually moved to Iraq, even before March 2003. The significance of Afghanistan hugely decreased. When the situation in Iraq deteriorated in 2004-5, the U.S. had little room for manoeuvre in Afghanistan. Only once the situation in Iraq started to improve in 2008 was attention refocused on Afghanistan. The losses incurred because of a lack of strategic troops and money between 2002 and 2008 could not have been repaired.

The diversion of resources created problems not only for Afghanistan but also for others at regional and global levels. The destabilization of Iraq and the growth in terrorist attacks strengthened the operational capacities of Al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Suicide attacks and improvised explosive devices (IED), not used previously in this region, soon became major weapons for local militants. The occupation of Iraq poured fuel on the terrorists' propaganda fire and radicalized youth in South Asia who became new recruits for the growing Afghan insurgency. Also, regional players drew a lesson from the U.S. policy. Afghanistan's neighbours had been reassured that the U.S. presence in Afghanistan would be short-lived and that they should prepare independently for the eventual American withdrawal from the region as they had done in the '90s. The incentive for constructive cooperation with the U.S. was lost.

More important, the intervention in Iraq dealt a fatal blow to the international legitimacy and popular support of the military mission in Afghanistan. The "war of necessity" in Afghanistan was confused with the "war of choice" in Iraq, resulting in a massive decrease in acceptance for the Afghan mission in NATO countries. The majority of democratic societies turned against their countries' involvement in the war in Afghanistan or didn't understand the reasons for their prolonged but just engagement there. Western governments sent confusing signals to their internal audiences explaining why they were

involved in the Afghan conflict (anti-terrorism, NATO solidarity, helping Afghans) but failed to sustain support for the mission. Not surprisingly, when the situation in Afghanistan started to deteriorate all these countries initiated preparations for exit strategies.

Regional Confusion

Al Qaeda and the Taliban were not destroyed in Afghanistan in 2001, but were only weakened and allowed to sneak out of the country to safe havens in neighbouring Pakistan. There they found a good environment to regroup, re-arm and re-launch their fight in Afghanistan in 2005. With their command structures, recruitment and training centres as well as sources of funds and weapons beyond the reach of NATO forces, they steadily gained strength and spread their uprising in Afghanistan. Without addressing this fundamental problem, peace in Afghanistan was impossible.

Pakistan, which was long hailed as a frontline state in the war on terror and a “major non-NATO ally” of the U.S., was given a free hand in dealing with violent extremists in FATA and Baluchistan. The Pakistan Army, fearing encirclement by India and searching for strategic depth in Afghanistan, had no interest in supporting the pro-India government of Afghan President Hamid Karzai and offered assistance to the main insurgent groups (Taliban Quetta Shura, Haqqani Network, Hekmatyar group) with the prospect of a new, pro-Pakistan regime in Kabul once the western forces withdrew from Afghanistan. The U.S. failed to signal early on their long-term commitment to a peaceful and stable Afghanistan and instead focused on the counterterrorism mission, sending a wrong impression to Pakistan.

Even after Pakistan was pushed to take on extremists in FATA in 2009, its approach was highly selective. The West for too long failed to recognize that NATO and Pakistan’s goals in Afghanistan were in contradiction and miscalculated the role played by Pakistan. Dependent on Pakistani cooperation in supplying NATO soldiers in Afghanistan, the West preferred to turn a blind eye to Pakistan’s ambiguous policy and didn’t deal with the real sources of regional instability (the India-Pakistan rivalry). Regional animosities have also stolen economic opportunities for Afghanistan, which is at a strategic location on the crossroads of South, Central and Western Asia.

From the Marshall Plan to a Rescue Plan

After the fall of the Taliban regime in November 2001, the international community seemed to understand well the development needs of Afghanistan. From the first donors conference in Bonn in December 2001 through the next meetings in Tokyo (2002), Berlin (2004), London (2006), Paris (2008) and London and Kabul (2010), the world community has committed nearly \$90 billion for Afghan reconstruction. Prospects for a proper state-building process looked quite promising, and U.S. President Bush even announced the idea of a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan in April 2002. Soon, however, Afghans realized that those pledges were not to be met and a comprehensive nation-building strategy was replaced with

limited anti-terrorism and counter-insurgency campaigns. The lack of security along with the slow flow of development money fed early disillusionment with foreign intervention in the society.

Out of the \$90 billion pledged for Afghanistan between 2001 and 2011, only \$57 billion has actually been disbursed.⁸ Although funds for Afghanistan were raised substantially in recent years (see Appendix, Figure 3) and Afghanistan became a major recipient of aid in 2009, in terms of per capita assistance it seems inadequate and below the level of other post-conflict countries. More than half of the actual assistance to Afghanistan (\$29 billion out of \$57 billion) was spent on Afghan security forces. According to international NGOs, one huge mistake was the militarization of aid and channelling the bulk of it through the army-run Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which were first established in 2002. One could argue that for a local farmer driving to the market in the nearest town it is not so important whether the road was constructed by PRT or a civilian agency. If development is to help stabilize conflict-prone areas, sometimes it needs to be done by the military. The problem with the PRTs, however, was that the aid through them was even more ineffective than through civilian assistance programs.

Although the international community has had several successes in Afghanistan (in education, health and press freedom among others), development aid is still too little and highly ineffective. A lack of coordination among different donors, the realization of aid projects through parallel implementing units and extensive use of subcontracting have further contributed to the waste of funds and has limited the impact of development projects. In 2010, only 20% of international aid to Afghanistan was being disbursed through official government structures, which goes against the rules of aid effectiveness (Paris Declaration) and which has undermined the ownership and capacities of the central government. On top of this, international donors paid more attention to democracy-building (holding regular elections) than to state and institution-building (training of administrative staff, judiciary, police, etc.), which form the groundwork for a deep democracy.

Not enough efforts were dedicated to economic reforms and creating work opportunities for Afghans, which is essential to the sustainability and stability of any country. As a result, Afghanistan today is dependent on international aid for more than 90% of its budget revenue. About one million young Afghans will enter the labour market in the next few years and that could increase social and political tensions in the country. Thus, as the transition period has begun and foreign troops prepare to exit from Afghanistan it is crucial to increase civilian aid and present a rescue plan focused especially on economic sustainability and job creation.

⁸ "Aid and Conflict in Afghanistan", *ICG Asia Report* No 210, 4 August 2011.

Lessons Learned

The conflict in Afghanistan was not lost on the battlefields. It was lost in the fields, factories, streets and courts. The latest World Development Report rightly found that “strengthening legitimate institutions and governance to provide citizen security, justice and jobs is crucial to break the cycle of violence”.⁹ These three sectors were precisely the most neglected by the international community. The lack of will or capability on behalf of the U.S. and NATO to provide security in Afghanistan has made the progress in nation-building (good-governance, justice) and development (jobs) more difficult. Although part of the blame for the deteriorating situation in the country also rests with Afghan elites, it is the world community with the U.S. as the leader that failed to present and implement a comprehensive, long-term strategy for Afghanistan and one that successfully combined security, development and regional dimensions into an effective reconstruction strategy.

It is not to say that the international efforts in Afghanistan were in vain. On the contrary, Afghanistan today is a much better place to live in than it was 10 years ago. Its gross domestic product grew more than threefold from \$3.532 billion in 2000 to \$12.853 billion in 2009, and in terms of GDP per capita (in current USD) Afghanistan improved from \$172 to \$456 during this period. The number of children enrolled in primary and secondary education increased from fewer than 1 million (exclusively boys) in 2001 to more than 8 million students (both boys and girls) in 2011.¹⁰ Basic health care, which was inaccessible to most Afghans in 2001, is now available to 82% of population. A free press, which was impossible during the Taliban regime, is now rampant, with dozens of independent newspapers and radio and TV stations. This progress needs to be continued in order to bring real change in Afghanistan. One should also draw crucial lessons from the failures in Afghanistan in recent years not only for future of that country but also for other post-conflict interventions.

Linking peace and development

Peace and development aid must go hand-in-hand, and the burden of the efforts of the intervening actors must be shared equally. There are situations in which the state needs to “import security” from the outside in order to introduce the authority of the central government, enforce the rule of law and create conditions for economic growth until the national security forces are capable of doing it by themselves. Hence, international troops deployed to post-conflict countries should from the very beginning pursue not merely a peace-keeping but rather a peace-enforcing mission—they need to be numerous enough and capable at combat tasks. It is worth underlining that although security is essential for development, it is development that can make peace and security sustainable. All military, economic and diplomatic efforts should eventually serve development goals. Contrary to the situation in Afghanistan, even if an outside army is engaged in development assistance, as is

⁹ *World Development Report 2011, op.cit.* p. 2.

¹⁰ *Afghan Index, op. cit.* pp. 31, 34.

sometimes necessary, it should not align its projects with its own short-term military goals but with the long-term needs and development priorities of the host nation. Winning hearts and minds is a credible approach, but has been done incorrectly thus far. Hearts and minds cannot be bribed and are only won over if people feel they can live better thanks to international help.

The long-haul

There are no quick fixes to repair states from scratch. Peace enforcement actions, nation-building and economic development are extremely complex and long-term processes. They need a significant amount of money and good coordination of efforts, but above all they need time. It took Western states about 300 years and many serious tragedies to build their prosperous and stable democracies. It would be naive to expect poor and fragile states such as Afghanistan to do the same in five years. While a decade is an absolute minimum if all opportunities are properly taken, a generation is a more accurate perspective and very often those involved should be prepared for an even longer haul. If any external player is not ready to engage and share the burdens of the reconstruction of a given country in such a long perspective it better remain outside. It would save problems not only for itself but also for the country that it wanted to help. Since the support of the population for controversial actions is essential in a democratic structure, this reality must be openly and clearly explained to society. People in the most-developed countries should be capable of understanding that in the interconnected world of the 21st century, investing in the development and prosperity of countries far from their borders is not only a moral duty but also the best investment in their own security.

Regional approach

No country is an isolated island. Obviously, landlocked countries are especially dependent on the actions, both good and bad, of their neighbours. On the one hand, robust trade with neighbouring countries and strong interregional infrastructure links could earn much-needed revenues for weak economies. On the other hand, a trust deficit and hostilities with neighbours can easily arrest development and increase the instability in any country. In Afghanistan, the U.S. underestimated the strategic interests of Pakistan and the destabilizing factor of the Pakistan-India rivalry. The international community failed to demand the closing of safe heavens for Afghan militants in Pakistan, since the majority of successful uprisings in history have been possible because of support from beyond the affected state's borders. In any future engagements, the intervening forces need to see this broader picture and understand the regional circumstances of a conflict. Sometimes it is better not to intervene at all when there are no chances to deal with the regional stalemate.

The Way Forward

Ten years after the first conference on Afghanistan in Bonn, world leaders reconvened there in the first days of December 2011. The agenda of the meeting includes the civil aspects of the transition process by 2014, the long-term engagement in Afghanistan after 2014, the political process to stabilize the country and its regional context. This gives hope that all those involved understand the situation there much better. The EU and the U.S. have already declared their intent to sustain the current levels of development funds after 2014. It is important to deliver on these promises and only gradually decrease Afghan reliance on foreign funds. The intervention in Afghanistan was a stark reminder that world powers know how to win wars but don't know how to win the peace. The crucial lesson one can draw from Afghanistan is that to win the peace there needs to be investment in development.

Instead of talking about an exit strategy, those involved must focus on renewing their civilian commitments to Afghanistan for the long term. As Paul Collier has convincingly argued, "economic recovery is [...] the only genuine exit strategy for peacekeeping".¹¹ They should not repeat the mistake of the '90s nor waste the decade-long engagement and sacrifices made there by too early a withdrawal. Instead of striking a compromise with the Taliban, the international community needs to refocus on the needs of the Afghan population and send a clear signal to them as well as to its own constituency that the major reason for further engagement in Afghanistan is human solidarity with the people in need. Even if Afghanistan is not a perfect democracy and some foreign funds are being wasted, there is no other way but to keep investing in this country and try to improve the effectiveness of the aid. The strengthening of the Afghan security forces, improved focus on civilian development and the tackling of regional sources of Afghanistan's instability could eventually bring peace to the country. Hopefully, the world will not miss the chance to learn from its own mistakes.

It must be borne in mind that in the 21st century, poverty and instability in places such as Afghanistan are not down to bad luck. Terrorism and piracy, the proliferation of weapons and the drug trade, humanitarian crises and the destabilization of wide regions of the world may all incur substantial economic, political and moral costs on developed societies as well. Investing in poor and fragile states is also the best investment for their long-term stability and peace. The world community needs to forge a comprehensive strategy for other similar situations to link security with development and take notice of regional sources of instability and the chances for prosperity. Focused development assistance could also serve as a pre-emptive tool to block complicated situations such as that in Afghanistan from evolving. The international community needs to be more pro-active than reactive in building peace.

¹¹ Paul Collier, *Wars, Guns and Votes. Democracy in Dangerous Places*, Vintage Books, London 2010, p. 89.

Appendix

Figure 1. U.S. and Other Foreign Troops Deployed to Afghanistan 2002–2011; (Source: *Afghanistan Index: Tracking variables of reconstruction and security in post-Taliban Afghanistan*, Brookings Institute, 29 September 2011)

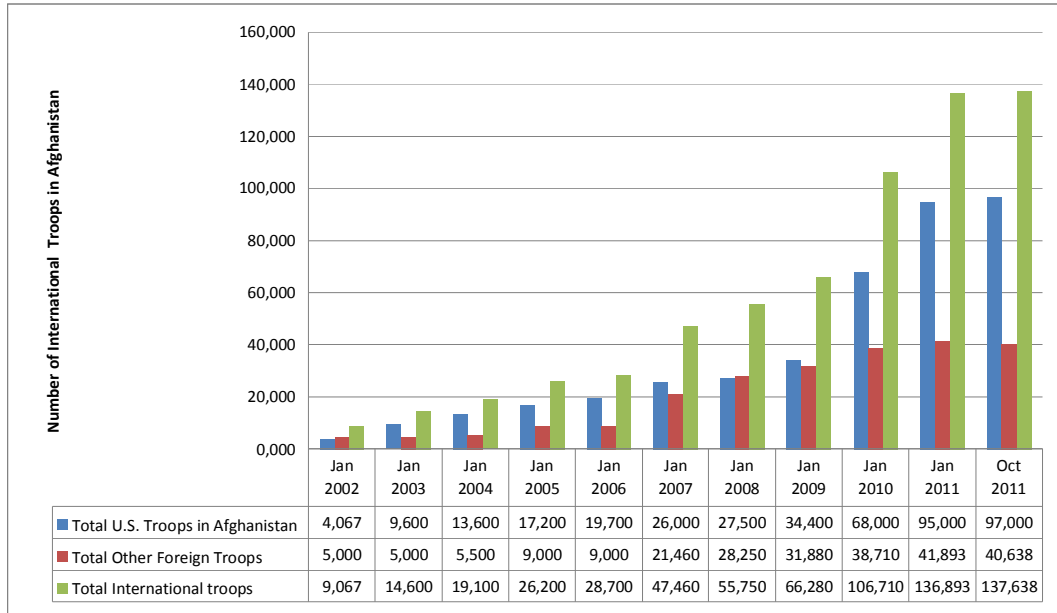


Figure 2. Size of Afghan Security Forces on Duty 2003–Present (Source: *Afghanistan Index*)

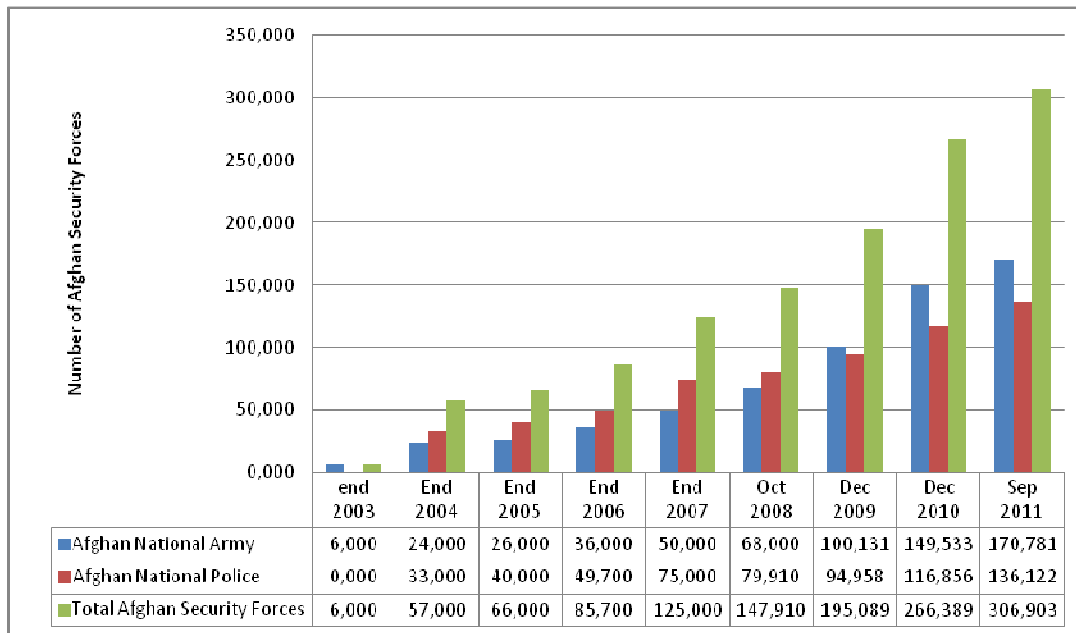


Figure 3. Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Afghanistan and Iraq (in \$ millions and \$/capita) 2001–2009 (Source: *World Development Indicators, WDI*)

