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Transition in Afghanistan: Winning the War of Perceptions?

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Abstract

A decade after the military intervention that dislodged the Taliban-Al Qaeda combine, peace and stability continues to elude Afghanistan. There is still no consensus in Western capitals on what constitutes the 'end-state' in Afghanistan. The Western public's frustration with a long-drawn war has coalesced with the global economic slowdown, the Euro crisis and the pressures of electoral campaign politics in the United States – thereby complicating the efforts for the long-term stabilisation of Afghanistan. Premature announcements of exit and dwindling financial assistance have added to the Afghan anxieties of being 'abandoned' once again. This paper brings to light the divergent perceptions among the key stakeholders in Afghanistan and in the international community (IC) on the trajectory of the 'incomplete' (transition) process. The paper argues that the war in Afghanistan is essentially a war of perceptions on progress made thus far. This widening gap in perceptions is bound to complicate the transition and long term stabilisation process.

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The Af-Pak Strategy, Surge & Exit

President Barack Obama, in emphasising on a renewed focus and more resources to the ‘good war’ in Afghanistan, announced a troop surge in his speech at West Point on 1 December 2009. Along with the surge, by setting the end of 2014 as the date for drawdown of forces, he ended speculations of the United States’ intent in that country and at the same time provided some clarity to his domestic constituency. It assuaged the concerns of the civilian team, led by Vice-President Joe Biden who had opposed the military commanders’ (General Stanley McChrystal and General David Petraeus) request of deploying additional troops for a population-centric counter-insurgency (COIN) campaign. However, the announcement of a date of drawdown sent a different message to the ‘friends and foes’ in the region. While it evoked concerns particularly among the Afghans, the message fed into the propaganda of the Taliban-led insurgency.²

The US Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta exacerbated the situation in early 2012 by stating that the transition process could be completed by 2013³, a year earlier than 2014. Likewise, calls for early withdrawal by NATO allies have further added to the concerns inside Afghanistan and the region. Although the declaration arrived at the 2010 Lisbon summit had stated that the ‘transition will be conditions-based, not calendar-driven, and will not equate to withdrawal of ISAF-troops’⁴, there was a perceived turnaround at the Chicago Summit in May 2012. President Obama and the NATO leaders agreed to end their role in the Afghan war, stating it is time for the Afghan people to take responsibility for their own security and for the US-led international troops to go home.⁵ The Summit decision called for the beginning of full transition in all parts of Afghanistan by mid-2013 and the Afghan forces taking the lead for security nation-wide. As per the plan, the ISAF will gradually draw down its forces to complete its mission by 31 December 2014.⁶

² The present-day Taliban-led insurgency is an agglomeration of various anti-government elements (AGE) and armed opposition forces (AOF) which include followers of Afghan warlord Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s radical group Hizb-i-Islami, the Haqqani network, Al Qaeda and its affiliates, religious clerics, power brokers, narcotic traffickers, bandits, smugglers, unemployed youth, tribal fighters in the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. Discussions with government and security officials in Afghanistan, May-June 2007 and June-July 2012.

³ Media Availability with Secretary of Defence Leon Panetta, US Department of Defense, 1 February, 2012, <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4967>. Accessed on 23 April 2012.

⁴ Lisbon Summit Declaration, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 20 November, 2010, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm. Accessed on 21 April 2012.

⁵ Helene Cooper and Matthew Rosenberg, ‘NATO Agrees on Afghan Security Transition in 2013’ The New York Times, 21 May 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/22/world/nato-formally-agrees-to-transition-on-afghan-security.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1&smid=fb-share. Accessed on 23 May 2012.

⁶ Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan – Issued by the Heads of State and Government of Afghanistan and Nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), 21 May 2012, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87595.htm. Accessed on 23 May 2012.

Such hasty announcements of early troop drawdown, largely perceived as ‘exit’, have been the source of obvious concerns inside Afghanistan, especially when the insurgency is perceived to be growing in strength and the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSFs) to withstand the insurgent onslaught remains suspect. Analysts in the West posit that the withdrawal of Western forces, in such a situation, would lead to a collapse of the evolving security system.⁷ Others point out that transition will either fail or be determined by Afghanistan’s internal dynamics and the role of regional states, regardless of what the US, Europe, and other aid-donors do.⁸ Amid such pessimistic assessments, the talks and attempts of actualising an effective transition and stabilisation process appear to be a mere lip service. It is, thus not surprising that Afghans view the *inteqal* (transition) process as a last opportunity for the international community to set the course right in their country.⁹

The paper is an exercise at stock-taking of the ground realities vis-a-vis the varying perceptions among the Afghans and the international community on the progress and challenges for Afghanistan's transition and long-term stabilisation. While the West in its haste to ‘exit’ wants to demonstrate progress, there remain concerns on the ground on the fragility of these achievements. The Afghans, while acknowledging progress, seek longer international commitment to address the grey areas that could undermine gains achieved thus far. More importantly, ‘unity of effort’ and an appropriate strategic communications strategy¹⁰ is imperative to address this widening perception gap.

Unlike pessimistic analyses that predict a return of the Taliban in post-2014 Afghanistan, the paper argues against such possibility. The paper highlights the tangible gains made in the security, political, governance and economic sectors during the decade-long international presence in the country and also, the areas where gains remain fragile and reversible. Unless unified effort is made to shore up the state and institution building processes before the drawdown date of 2014, the dangers of reversal are imminent resulting in a civil war (worse case scenario) or the continuation and intensification of chaos and instability (stalemate), with the external power interventions and the regional proxies further exacerbating the internal-external conflict dynamics (internecine warfare).

⁷ Gilles Dorransoro, Afghanistan: The Impossible Transition, The Carnegie Papers South Asia, Carnegie endowment for International peace, June 2011, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/impossible_transition.pdf. Accessed on 10 June 2012.

⁸ Anthony H. Cordesman, Afghanistan: The Uncertain Economics of Transition, Center for Strategic & International Studies, April 2012, http://csis.org/files/publication/120418_afghanistan_uncertain_economics_transition.pdf. Accessed on 10 June 2012.

⁹ Author’s discussions with serving and former ministers, political luminaries, government officials, media personnel, security personnel, academia, members of think tanks, international organisations (IO) and non-governmental organisations (NGO), Kabul, June-July 2012.

¹⁰ Muhammad Sabir Siddiqi, ‘Role of Strategic Communication and Public Awareness in Actualizing Transition’ in Shanthie Mariet D’Souza (ed.) Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

The Evolving Security Situation and the Taliban Insurgency

Afghanistan continues to encounter a fragile security situation. While the 2010 troop surge achieved notable security gains on the ground, analysts argue that such gains are reversible and almost un-sustainable by the ANSFs alone. According to the drawdown plan, the additional troops of 33,000 have been withdrawn in September 2012 leaving behind 68,000 US troops in the country. As the debate on the usefulness of the surge continues,¹¹ the US-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement signed on 1 May 2012 has ensured a minimal troop presence (20,000-30,000) for limited counter-terrorism, 'train and assist' mission.

While the security situation is said to have improved in south-western Afghanistan, eastern Afghanistan, primarily provinces of Paktika, Paktia, and Khost (known as the P2K region), bordering Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), and area of operations of the Haqqani Network, remain deeply insurgency infested. The campaign of violence by the insurgents has been lethal and continues to sap the nascent institutions of the Afghan state. By employing asymmetric tactics with increasing use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide bombers, the insurgents have managed to keep the levels of troop deaths high. High-profile attacks on symbolic targets like the Intercontinental hotel in Kabul (June 2011), British Council (August 2011), the American embassy (September 2011), Kabul Star Hotel (April 2012), Qargah attack (June 2012), Camp Bastion (September 2012) demonstrate their deep strike capability and intent to garner instant and worldwide media attention.

The Taliban have adopted brutal tactics of violent retribution and intimidation of the population, targeting those deemed to be associated with, or sympathetic to, the government. This strategy witnessed rampant killing and abduction of government officials, aid workers, teachers, religious and tribal leaders. . Systematic targeting and elimination of power brokers, government officials and police chiefs in 2011 added new set of complexities and raised the spectre of civil war in the north. Likewise, elimination of key government officials and power brokers in the South, has led to a power vacuum in the Pashtu areas. The Taliban have established shadow governments in areas where the writ of the Afghan government was limited or non-existent.

¹¹ Rajiv Chandrasekaran, 'The Afghan Surge Is Over: So did it work?', Foreign Policy, 25 September 2012, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/09/25/the_afghan_surge_is_over?page=full. Accessed on 26 September 2012; Frances Z. Brown, Taking stock of the surge - from the bottom up, The Af-Pak Channel, Foreign Policy, 26 September 2012. http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/09/26/taking_stock_of_the_surge_from_the_bottom_up. Accessed on 27 September 2012.

Much of the insurgent strength is derived from the sense of safety the insurgents are accorded across the Durand line, within Pakistan. Taliban recruits and enjoys safe havens in that country. The Pentagon's April 2012 report to Congress on Security and Stability in Afghanistan stated that despite progress, international efforts to stabilise the country 'continued to face both long-term and acute challenges'. 'The Taliban-led insurgency and its Al Qaeda affiliates still operate with impunity from sanctuaries in Pakistan,' the report said. 'The insurgency's safe haven in Pakistan, as well as the limited capacity of the Afghan Government, remain the biggest risks to the process of turning security gains into a durable and sustainable Afghanistan', it added.¹² The heightened tensions between Pakistan and the US over the assassination of Osama bin Laden by American Special Forces in the garrison town of Abbottabad in May 2011 and the subsequent accidental killing of 28 Pakistani security forces during a NATO air raid in Salala in November 2011, the increase in drone strikes inside Pakistani territory, have added complexities and limited the scope of the counter-terrorism cooperation with Pakistan. This has also resulted in Pakistan being at the 'margins'¹³ in the evolving end game in Afghanistan.

Security Sector Reform (SSR) and Preparedness of ANSF

At the 2010 Lisbon Summit, NATO provided a road map to transfer security responsibility to the Afghans. The first tranche of provinces, districts, and municipalities, which has 25 per cent of Afghanistan's population, was handed over to the Afghans in July 2011. The second and third tranches were announced in November 2011 and March 2012 respectively. While the second tranche put the Afghans in the lead of providing security for more than 50 per cent of the country's population¹⁴, with the beginning of the third tranche, 75 per cent of the Afghan population will be living in areas where the ANSF have lead security responsibility.¹⁵ As per the decisions arrived at the May 2012 Chicago Summit, full transition in all parts of Afghanistan will begin by mid-2013.

¹² Jim Michaels, 'Pentagon: Strategy in Afghanistan is sound, despite hurdles', USA Today (2 May 2012), <http://www.usatoday.com/news/military/story/2012-05-01/afghanistan-taliban-coalition-progress/54666318/1>. Accessed on 9 August 2012.

¹³ Rasul Bakhsh Rais, 'Pakistan's Perspective on the Afghan Transition' in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

¹⁴ Statement by NATO Secretary General on Afghan Transition Announcement, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 27 November 2011, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/SID-656CC458-77FAA000/natolive/news_81068.htm. Accessed on 20 April 2012.

¹⁵ Louisa Brooke-Holland and Claire Taylor, *Afghanistan: The Timetable for Security Transition*, Briefing Paper, British House of Commons, 9 July 2012, www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05851.pdf. Accessed on 9 August 2012.

The natural corollary of the ANSF taking charge of the security of Afghanistan is a change in NATO mission – from combat to an advisory role. The shift to ‘train and assist’ mode has further compounded the complexities and brought to sharp focus the levels of preparedness of the Afghan forces for independent action. The contours of post-2014 security assistance to Afghanistan will be mentoring, training, and funding the ANSF. Although numerically, both the Afghan National Army (ANA) the Afghan National Police (ANP) are impressive, with 194,466 troops and 149,642 policemen¹⁶ respectively, widespread reservations have been expressed on their capacities. Will the ANSF, product of a rushed, under-resourced and frequently revamped recruitment and training procedure, be able to deliver, remains a critical question. While the US and NATO and the Afghan security officials¹⁷ are willing to underline the latter's ascending capacities, such views have been viewed with considerable scepticism among civil society and women groups, NGOs and people in Afghanistan.

The impressive performance of the ANSF during some of the high-profile and well co-ordinated insurgent attacks has been cited as evidence of its growing strength and capabilities. Analysts insist that they have come of age and are no longer the ‘rag tag’ men in uniform they used to be. At the same time, concerns still exist on the ANSF capability to gather adequate intelligence on the planning and execution of well-coordinated multiple sieges, an insurgent tactic that has gained predominance. Example is cited of the multi-city Taliban attack on 15 April 2012, when Taliban suicide attackers carried out attack on Kabul, and three other eastern provinces – Nangarhar, Logar and Paktia. The fact that the insurgents could slip into the protected capital evading several security check points with a huge stockpile of weapons and penetrate the most secure inner circle of Kabul’s ring of steel is a matter of deep worry. NATO commended the ANSF for effectively defending the city and ultimately quelling the attack. But observers are quick to point out that the operation appeared impossible to conclude without the back-up support from NATO helicopters and Special Forces. NATO’s praise for the ANSF is understandable, for it is on such success that the exit strategy is predicated.¹⁸

¹⁶ Report on Progress Towards Security and Stability in Afghanistan: United States Plan for Sustaining the Afghanistan National Security Forces, US Department of Defence, April 2012, p.4, http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report_Final_SecDef_04_27_12.pdf. Accessed on 1 May 2012.

¹⁷ Discussions with General Sheer Mohammad Karimi, Chief of Staff, Afghan National Army, Kabul, 27 June 2012; Gen Azimi, Spokesperson, ANA, Kabul, 26 June 2012; ISAF officials, Kabul, 25 June 2012.. The contrasting views on the prevailing security condition and preparedness of ANSF were evident during discussions with civil society groups, NGOs and locals in Afghanistan. Also see Arian Sharifi, ‘Security in Afghanistan Beyond 2014: Preparedness of the Afghan National Security Forces’ in Shanthie Mariet D’Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Discussions with ISAF officials, Kabul, 25 June 2012. Also see Bilal Sarwary, ‘Analysis: What Kabul attacks say about Afghan security’, BBC News, 16 April 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-17725266>. Accessed on 16 April 2012.

The ANA has been primarily employed to augment the international forces' COIN campaign. In 2011, over 90 per cent of ISAF operations were conducted in conjunction with the ANA, an increase from 62 per cent of such operations in spring and summer of 2008. However, this projected conjunction could actually be a misnomer. According to a recent US Department of Defence report in 2012, only 13 out of the 156 Afghan Army battalions are classified as 'independent with advisers' and only 74 are seen as 'effective with advisers'. In effect, there is very little to indicate that the ANA will be able to act autonomously over large swathes of the countryside in the next two or three years. Especially remote in the coming years is the possibility of transferring responsibility for the protection of the provinces bordering Pakistan to the Afghan army.¹⁹

Alongside the questions of capacities, maintaining a huge security force establishment is a financial impossibility for the resource-starved Afghan government. The total strength of the ANSF in October 2011 reached 306,903 (170,781 soldiers and 136,122 policemen). Future plans envisage an increase to 352,000 personnel (195,000 ANA and 157,000 ANP) by October 2012. Final ANSF end-strength post-2014, however, remains to be determined by prevailing security, political and financial conditions. The government in Kabul is bound to face the most formidable challenge of mentoring the forces and finding continuous funding for such a huge project. These numbers would be highly unsustainable for an external-aid-dependent state whose core annual budget is barely US\$2.685 billion for the 2012-13 financial year. It was after much deliberation, the US and its allies, at the Chicago summit, envisaged a force of 228,500 with an estimated annual budget of \$4.1 billion.²⁰ This amounts to what the US currently spends every 12 days in Afghanistan.²¹

The greater worry, however, lies in the scenario of acceleration of training impinging on the quality of the forces. Analysts suggest that the ANSF is already 'unmanageable' and hence, the term 'expansion' is nothing but a paradox.²² While observers perceive some success in terms of raising a capable and independent ANA, serious concerns have been expressed about the capabilities of the ANP and the convoluted attempts in establishing rule of law. Analysts point out that while the ANA is seen as a relative success vis-a-vis the ANP, the chronic deficiencies

¹⁹ Gilles Dorransoro, Afghanistan: The Impossible Transition, The Carnegie Papers, South Asia, Carnegie endowment for International Peace, June 2011, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/impossible_transition.pdf. Accessed on 20 May 2012.

²⁰ Fact Sheet: Chicago Summit - Sufficient and Sustainable ANSF, The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, (21 May 2012), <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/21/fact-sheet-chicago-summit-sufficient-and-sustainable-ansf>. Accessed on 23 May 2012.

²¹ Luke Coffey, The 2012 NATO Summit In Chicago: NATO In Need Of American Leadership, Eurasia Review, (17 May 2012), <http://www.eurasiareview.com/17052012-the-2012-nato-summit-in-chicago-nato-in-need-of-american-leadership-analysis/#.T7VZ86u17Hk>.email Accessed on 18 May 2012

²² Thomas Johnson and Matthew Dupee, 'Transition to Nowhere: The Limits of "Afghanization"', Foreign Policy, 22 March 2011, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/03/22/transition_to_nowhere_the_limits_of_afghanization. Accessed on 5 April 2011.

and problems of funding, equipment, training, desertion, ethnic balancing and infiltration cannot be overlooked.²³

There are serious concerns of creating a ‘hyper-militarised’ state.²⁴ The feasibility of building a large army without addressing larger issues of civil-military relations has been questioned, particularly when the government in Kabul is perceived to be weak. The lingering concerns of ethnic balancing and representation combined with the challenges of building a national army on meritocratic lines remain. Despite major efforts by the NATO Training Mission in Afghanistan (NTM-A) in recent years, the development of the institutional capacity of the ANSF will take years. The ANSF's quality, its professional and institutional capability and its capacity to function in an unstable and conflict-ridden environment are bound to be tested in the coming years.²⁵

The rising incidence of ‘green on blue attacks’, i.e. rogue soldiers and police turning their weapons on their ISAF mentors, remains a serious concern. In 2011, 35 NATO soldiers and trainers were killed in 21 incidents of such ‘green on blue’ attacks by the Afghan soldiers. In the first half of 2012, there have been 32 such incidents, killing 40. The Taliban are quick to claim credit for such attacks, claiming infiltration of its cadres into the ANSF ranks. NATO commanders, on the other hand, argue that many such attacks are driven by personal grudges rather than loyalty to the Taliban or other groups.²⁶ In addition to problems associated with inadequate vetting mechanisms and background checks due to the rush to recruit, the increased number of attacks has led to a ‘trust deficit’ between the Afghan soldiers and their mentors leading to scaling down of the NATO’s training and mentoring assistance.²⁷

While the ANA is construed to be relatively successful, the Afghan National Police (ANP) is bedevilled with problems. The ANP is expected to perform law enforcement, border protection and counter-narcotics functions. However, the ANP is not only perceived to be ineffective, corrupt and ill-disciplined²⁸, it faces the problems of funding, training, recruitment, equipment,

²³ Author’s discussions with academia, members of think tanks and non-governmental organisations, civil society and women’s groups in Kabul, June-July 2012.

²⁴ Julian Glover, ‘Few politicians say it, but most think it: our Afghan war is a disaster’, *The Guardian*, 11 April 2011, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/11/afghanistan-strategy-failed. Accessed on 11 April 2011.

²⁵ Ali A. Jalali, ‘The Challenges and Prospects of Transition in Afghanistan’ in Shanthie Mariet D’Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

²⁶ Author’s discussions with ISAF officials, Kabul, 25 June 2012.

²⁷ Greg Jaffe and Kevin Sieff, Training suspended for new Afghan recruits, *The Washington Post*, 2 September 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/training-suspended-for-new-afghan-recruits/2012/09/01/adc4ed1c-f398-11e1-b74c-84ed55e0300b_story.html. Accessed on 3 September 2012.

²⁸ Despite Improvements in MoI’s Personnel Systems, Additional Actions Are Needed to Completely Verify ANP Payroll Costs and Workforce Strength, SIGAR (Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan

infiltrations and desertions. ANP's development has been hindered by lack of institutional reform, widespread corruption, insufficient international military trainers and advisors. As a result, ANP has minimal control over the urban centres, with almost no presence in Afghan villages where they are most needed.

To address the inadequacies of the ANP, a stop-gap measure of recruiting tribal militias under the Afghan Local Police (ALP)²⁹ has been initiated. In a spate of anti-Taliban uprisings, on the lines of the Anwar Awakening in Iraq, these forces have been successful in repelling the harsh Taliban edicts, school closings in Ghazni, music bans in Nuristan, beheadings in Paktia and murders in Laghman, among other causes. However, concerns remain of such independent and 'well-stocked armouries-militias and they typically behave like the Taliban with a different name'.³⁰ The project of replicating the Iraq model runs imminent danger of a contravention of the efforts of long-term institution-building and reforms in the security sector. These persisting weaknesses and 'quick fixes' are bound to affect the ANSF performance in the long term.

Political Sector, Constitutional and Electoral Reform

While most of the debate on transition has veered towards security sector, meaningful discussion on the transition in the political sector, particularly when the year of handover of responsibility coincides with the 2014 presidential elections in Afghanistan, seems to be missing. Analysts posit that 'placing sole responsibility for Afghanistan's future stability on the ANSF without making progress in creating a stronger political consensus among Afghanistan's diverse factions, both armed and unarmed, is a high-risk gamble'.³¹

Reconstruction), 25 April 2011, www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR%20Audit-11-10.pdf. Accessed on 22 May 2012.

²⁹ C.J. Radin, 'Afghan Local Police vital to General Petraeus' strategy', *The Long War Journal*, 26 March 2011, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2011/03/afghan_local_police.php. Accessed on 29 March 2011.

³⁰ According to analysts, most 'uprisings' fail to secure any kind of sponsorship, as neither Kabul nor ISAF have the resources or flexibility to offer anything of substance to such a large number of groups in equal need, David H. Young, "The anatomy of an anti-Taliban uprising", *The Af-Pak Channel*, 12 September 2012, <https://mail.google.com/mail/?shva=1#search/uprisings/139c0e93b3b69ce8>. Accessed on 13 September 2012. Habib Khan Totakhil, 'Taliban Targeted by Local Uprisings', *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 September 2012, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444620104578006201295641128.html?mod=googlenews_wsj. Accessed on 21 September 2012.

³¹ Caroline Wadhams, Colin Cookman & Brian Katulis, *Afghanistan Transition: Elevating the Diplomatic Components of the Transition Strategy at the Chicago NATO Summit and Beyond*, Center for American Progress, 17 May 2012, http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2012/05/afghanistan_transition.html. Accessed on 20 May 2012.

Over the past decade, the highly centralised executive form of political system has been constantly challenged, both by the insurgent campaign to discredit the present political system and also by the challenges from within the system. The constant bickering between the President and Parliament, deteriorating security, poor governance and the near-absence of rule of law have sparked debates inside and outside Afghanistan for the need for wide-ranging political sector reforms. The magnitude of the problem and simmering discontent has led observers to forewarn: ‘If in 2001 the West was afraid that the absence of a strong centralised government in Kabul would prompt Afghanistan’s dissolution, by 2011 the West has come to fear that a dysfunctional centralised government could cause this same outcome.’³²

In addition to the existing challenges in the political sector, the complexity of holding elections in the year of handover of authority is daunting. Analysts point out: ‘The Afghan presidential election slated for 2014 is an uninspiring prospect given the sky-high levels of corruption, nepotism, and patronage that beleaguers the Afghan political system. To make things worse, President Hamid Karzai has suggested holding the elections in 2013 to avoid an overlap with the planned end of NATO’s combat mission. And there is still no functional plan in place for a smooth transfer of political power to a post-Karzai government.’³³ In the absence of large scale political sector and electoral reform, the danger of repeat of previous instances of electoral malpractices at a crucial time of transition is cause for widespread concern.³⁴

The challenges associated with institution-building in the political sector stem from inadequate steps taken by the international community to help build a robust political system based on a sound understanding of the nature of the Afghan state and the political processes, which shape the local preferences. According to Fawzia Koofi, a potential presidential contender and Member of Parliament (MP) from Badkshan, the main issue facing post-conflict societies is the construction of a politically stable and democratic state that has both the institutions and legitimacy to remain viable in the long run.³⁵

³² Thomas Barfield, ‘Afghanistan’s Ethnic Puzzle: Decentralising Power before the US Withdrawal’, *Foreign Affairs* (September/ October 2011).

³³ Javid Ahmad, ‘Election 2014: Afghanistan’s chance to get it right?’, *Foreign Policy*, 10 May 2012, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/05/10/election_2014_afghanistans_chance_to_get_it_right. Accessed on 20 May 2012.

³⁴ Author’s discussion with various political leaders and potential presidential contenders mainly from the National Coalition and National Front – Ahmed Zia Massoud, Ahmed Wali Massoud, Dr. Abdullah, Fawzia Koofi, Kabul, June-July 2012.

³⁵ Fawzia Koofi, ‘Challenges of Institution Building in Afghanistan’, Presentation at an international workshop on Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?, Institute of South Asian Studies, Singapore, January 9-10, 2012. For more details see Shanthie Mariet D’Souza (ed.), ‘Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?’, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012.

Afghan observers point out that the first and second Bonn conferences did not address the need for political reform. The 2004 Constitution, which is sourced mostly from the 1964 Constitution when Afghanistan was a monarchy, has established one of the most highly centralised governments in the world. A gradual political reform towards a less centralised government is a necessary step. Amending the 2004 Constitution to establish different forms of government based on decentralisation, while preserving the unity of Afghanistan, remains the only viable option. This would help build consensus among Afghans and lay the foundations of durable peace as the international military footprint recedes in 2014. If Afghanistan is to achieve some degree of stability after 2014, a concerted effort must be exerted towards political reform through checks and balances.³⁶ Two rounds of elections in Afghanistan have identified the ineffectiveness of the current electoral system. The Afghan Constitution has shown limitations in providing answers to disputes arising from power relations of three branches of the government and jurisdictions of institutions over governing elections.³⁷

Despite a decade-long international commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan, not much has been done for institution-building, improving governance and establishing the rule of law. The nascent democratic government led by President Karzai is perceived as weak, corrupt and ineffective by the international community and the local population. The fraud-marred parliamentary elections of September 2011 further strengthened this perception. Moreover, the reliance on local power brokers and warlords in the security operations and aid-delivery has undermined the development of effective state institutions and the rule of law. Consequently, the government now lacks credible institutional and political muscle to offset the influence of local power brokers and their deeply entrenched patronage systems. This has resulted in corruption that permeates and impedes not only governance but also the political and economic sectors and has become a major obstacle in achieving security and development.³⁸ Problems in the political sector have been exacerbated by a corresponding governance deficit.³⁹ The near absence of an effective and independent Afghan civil service is another area of concern. The Afghan government runs almost entirely on 'contract employment' and most of the better-qualified government employees are getting their pay from donor-financed project. This effectively means that when the donors leave with their funds, most of these government officials would also leave with them, leaving the country with an even poorer prospect of establishing service-delivery mechanisms.

³⁶ Ahmad Wali Masoud, 'Political Reform and Peace-building in Afghanistan' in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

³⁷ Author's discussion with Sima Samar, Chairperson, Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC), Kabul, 1 February 2012.

³⁸ Ali A. Jalali, 'The Challenges and Prospects of Transition in Afghanistan' in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

³⁹ Shahmahmood Miakhel, 'Myths and Impact of Bad Governance on Stability in Afghanistan' in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

The lack of effective governance as also of anti-corruption measures and the absence of more inclusive politics would impede effective transition. Despite repeated attempts, the international community has been unable to convince President Karzai to permit political parties to assume a more direct role in the election process. This combined with a peculiar voting system of Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) has contributed to the country's fragmented politics and often immobilised legislative process. Analysts forewarn that the international community's leverage with Afghan government in pressing for political sector reforms would decline as its presence in the country reduces.⁴⁰

The presidential elections are scheduled to be held in 2014, coinciding with the pullout of international troops. In the absence of large-scale political sector and electoral reform, the danger of repeat of previous instances of electoral malpractices at a crucial time of transition remains a cause for widespread concern. The Afghan Constitution does not allow President Karzai to run for a third term. A smooth transition of power to a new elected president and an expansion of the political basis of the government will have a positive impact on the stabilisation of the country. On the contrary, any attempts by the present-day government to delay the elections as part of a power-sharing deal with the Taliban or to introduce measures such as convening a 'Loya Jirga' to rubber stamp an unconstitutional move to stay in power or appoint a 'successor', or resort to *a la Putin* technique could see the country slide back into renewed civil strife.⁴¹

Peace Talks, Reconciliation and Reintegration

The ambiguity of the peace processes, reconciliation, reintegration, talks and negotiations with the insurgents has complicated the search for the 'political solution' to end the long war in Afghanistan. As individual countries are involved in unilateral and parallel efforts of negotiations, setting up office and contacts outside Afghanistan, this has further reinforced the notion that the West is willing to cut a deal with the insurgents and leave. Such secretive and uncoordinated attempts have also raised concerns among the women and human rights groups and ethnic minorities. According to a survey conducted by Asia Foundation, 'most Afghans want their girls educated, they want women to be able to go to the marketplace freely, they want them to be in public freely, they don't agree with what the Taliban had done in the 1990s'.⁴² However, in the present discourse on transition, not just the gender narrative has taken a back seat, there

⁴⁰ Marvin Weinbaum, 'US Perspectives of the Afghan Transition Process' in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

⁴¹ and factions– Dr. Abdullah, Fawzia Koofi, Ali A. Jalali, Ahmed Zia Massoud, Ahmed Wali Massoud, Amrullah Saleh, Hanif Atmar, Sima Samar, Kabul, October 2011, January-February and June-July 2012.

⁴² Ruth Rennie (ed.), *Afghanistan in 2011: A Survey of the Afghan People*, The Asia Foundation, 2011, <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/TAF2011AGSurvey.pdf>. Accessed on 15 May 2012.

are impending fears that the achievements made in the last decade with regard to women's rights could be lost.⁴³

The indigenous peace-building efforts like the High Peace Council (HPC) and the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP)⁴⁴ appear to be casualty in the process, of both the insurgent onslaught⁴⁵ and the international community's strategy of omission. Even with the long-standing focus on negotiation with the high-ranking Taliban leaders, it is unclear if the international community has moved beyond a phase of opportunistic negotiation, i.e. negotiating with whosoever is available and willing rather than with insurgents of consequence and insurgents enjoying the sanction of top leaders in the insurgent hierarchy. It is still not clear whether the process involves the Taliban leadership based in Quetta (Quetta Shura Taliban). Or, is it simply trying to rope in people who have grown irrelevant to the insurgent movement, sometimes even getting duped by impostors who pose as interlocutors or representatives of the Taliban?

While the lack of credible information on the identity of the interlocutors is a lesser problem, several critical hurdles remain for the parties involved to make any significant headway. The most important is the demand of the US that it would retain bases within Afghanistan beyond 2014. President Karzai has downplayed the talk of permanent presence of US troops, stating that it would be an impediment for negotiations with the Taliban who demanded complete withdrawal of foreign forces as a precondition for talks. Some moves were made to release imprisoned Taliban commanders from the detention centre at Guantanamo Bay, the failure to do so prompted the Taliban to suspend the peace talks in March 2012. Efforts, however, continued to keep the fledgling negotiation process going, both by the US and its allies.

Lack of a Pakistani endorsement, rooted in the country's fear of being sidelined from the end-game in Afghanistan, has also played spoiler. In 2009, the negotiation prospect with the Taliban made some progress through a Taliban commander Mullah Baradar, second in command to Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban. However, Pakistani establishment stepped in and arrested Baradar in early 2010, derailing the entire process. The same process resumed in 2012. Some other sources identified Tayyeb Agha, head of the political committee of the Taliban as

⁴³ Author's discussions with women's groups and civil society organisations, Kabul, January and June 2012.

⁴⁴ For more details on the HPC and APRP, see Mohammad Masoom Stanekzai, 'Peace, Reconciliation and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Challenges and Milestones Facing Peace Talks, Transition and Stability in the Region' in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

⁴⁵ The killing of the HPC chief Burhanuddin Rabbani in September 2011 by a Taliban 'peace emissary' was a major setback for the peace process. On 14 April 2012, Salahuddin Rabbani, the son of slain Burhanuddin Rabbani was chosen to lead the HPC. The next day, Taliban carried out multiple siege attacks, showing a complete disdain towards the peace process.

another key interlocutor for the back channel talks. Tayyeb, too, was rumoured to have been arrested by Pakistan in 2010 along with some other Taliban leaders. The control of the Pakistani military and intelligence over the Taliban leadership, seen as the ‘strategic assets’, would make any meaningful Afghan-led reconciliation process an arduous task.

The US desire to talk to the insurgents from a position of strength continues to be a pipe dream. With the beginning of drawdown of international forces, the Taliban perceive themselves to be winning. In addition, by launching a successful campaign of violent retribution and targeted assassinations, the Taliban managed to create a power vacuum of sorts in southern Afghanistan. Three major assassinations in 2011 – Ahmed Wali Karzai, half brother of President Karzai, and presidential aide Jan Mohammed Khan, both powerful warlords and the Mayor of Kandahar, Ghulam Haider Hamidi – created a power vacuum in the south with consequent erosion of President Karzai’s support base among the Pushtuns. As the contours of the negotiations remain unclear, the high-profile killings in the north and systematic elimination by the insurgents of those who oppose the negotiations process have raised fears among other ethnic and women groups. It has also led to polarisation of among other ethnic groups⁴⁶ with whispers of civil war gaining momentum.

The talk of the early withdrawal of international forces and the ongoing negotiations with the Taliban have not only raised the levels of anxiety but have also been exploited by various actors as they position and jockey for power and influence in post-2014 Afghanistan. The negotiations with the Taliban constitute one such source of anxiety. As Americans claim that they have established contacts with the insurgents for peace talks in Qatar, various segments of the insurgency and power brokers are aiming to outbid each other in order to secure a larger portion of the pie. Not surprisingly, most of the violence has taken place in areas dominated by the Hizb-e-Islami. Its leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, is eyeing a major share of the peace deal.

Aid, Economic Development and Regional Cooperation

Most of the discourse on transition has focused on the numerical strength of the troops that would be adequate to maintain the country’s security. Civilian capacity building, economic opportunities, trade, transit and investment that would change the narrative of Afghanistan from being an aid-dependent ‘rentier state’ to a self-sustaining economy, thereby bringing in long-term stability, have received comparatively less attention. The intrinsic nature of aid-giving and

⁴⁶ Author’s discussion with various political leaders including the National Coalition and National Front – Ahmed Zia Massoud, Ahmed Wali Massoud, Dr. Abdullah, Amrullah Saleh, Fawzia Koofi, Kabul, June-July 2012.

execution of development projects through contracts and sub-contracting, has done little to build on state capacities or local ownership. Afghanistan's problem essentially lies in the lack of 'unity of effort' (UoE) on the part of the international community in developing a well-coordinated and long-term strategy to build and strengthen the institutions and 'bring the state back' into the development process. In rebuilding conflict-ridden states like Afghanistan, aid-delivery through 'alternate delivery mechanisms' like the IOs and INGOs or direct delivery through embassies, and community-based groups plays a crucial role in providing immediate humanitarian relief and assistance but in the long term have not been helpful in building state institutions of delivery and implementation.⁴⁷

At a time of dwindling international financial assistance to Afghanistan, concerns abound on sustaining its economy and revenue beyond 2014. Contrary to the Afghan government's November 2011 estimate, it requires US\$120 billion (at the rate of US\$10 billion per year) in aid in the post-2014 period, through 2025⁴⁸. At the Tokyo summit in July 2012, international community promised to give US\$16 billion through 2015 to build its economy and make necessary reforms. Such dwindling financial aid is construed as a natural corollary of the declining interest of the West in Afghanistan. Development aid from US, the largest aid donor, has dropped from US\$3.5 billion in 2010 to about US\$2 billion in 2011. Aid to support democracy, governance and civil society dropped by more than 50 per cent and from US\$231 million to US\$93 million in the same period.⁴⁹ Amidst such a drop in aid-giving, exploring avenues for revenue generation, trade, foreign investment and development of indigenous economic base remains critical. Over the coming years, Afghanistan will have to compensate for such shrinkage of external support. The full impact of the shrinkage on Afghanistan's economic growth, fiscal sustainability and service delivery will probably not be felt until after 2014.

The huge international spending in Afghanistan over the past decade has dramatically raised domestic prices (particularly of skilled workers and residential/commercial properties) that the country is no longer export-competitive vis-a-vis other South Asian countries. At least in this respect, the gradual scaling down of foreign spending might help lower prices closer to 'South Asian levels', which may help Afghanistan in increasing its exports although 'transit' issues will still remain a challenge.

⁴⁷ For a grassroots perspective on aid effectiveness see Rangina Hamidi's, 'Aid, Development, Women, Non-Governmental Organisations: Grassroots Perspective' and Najeeb Ur Rahman Manalai, 'Afghanistan in the Course of Transition: Civilian Surge, Aid Coordination, War Economy and Alternative Livelihood' in Shanthie Mariet D'Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

⁴⁸ Towards a Self-Sustaining Afghanistan, An Economic Transition Strategy, Speech of President Hamid Karzai, Bonn Conference, 30 November 2011. Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, and dated November 29, 2011.

⁴⁹ Julian Borger, 'Afghanistan conference promises support after troop withdrawal', *The Guardian*, 5 December 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/dec/05/afghanistan-conference-support-troop-withdrawal>. Accessed on 20 May 2012.

The transition process also assumes that Afghanistan will remain an aid-dependent state, in need of assistance to its economy and development for at least another decade. While the second Bonn conference on ‘Afghanistan and the International Community: From Transition to the Transformation Decade’ held in December 2011 has set an extended period of international assistance: 2014-24 and has termed it the ‘transformational decade’, the contours of international assistance and engagement remain highly unclear. A series of international conferences seems to miss the crucial point that stabilising Afghanistan by devising quick-fix solutions and setting arbitrary timelines do not meet the needs on the ground. A successful transition is contingent on the continued, albeit slow, growth in the administrative capacity of government ministries, and on improvements in local governance, civil service, development and employment opportunities at the district level.

Afghanistan’s tragedy lies in the fact that time and again its internal contradictions have got trapped in the external power agenda. With the intensification of the search for the ‘end-game’, a regional consensus⁵⁰ by forging greater cooperation is seen as a way out of the imbroglio. One way of building a cooperative regional architecture is through greater trade and transit, investment opportunities, including energy pipelines. The Istanbul Conference for Afghanistan: Security and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia, held on 2 November 2011, provided a new agenda for regional cooperation, by placing Afghanistan at its centre and engaging the ‘Heart of Asia’ countries in sincere and result-oriented cooperation for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan, as well as a secure and prosperous region as a whole. The emphasis for the first time on a regionally owned process led by Afghanistan, with support and collaboration from its near and extended neighbours, would make this effort ‘sustainable and irreversible’ in the long term.⁵¹ As the first follow-up ministerial meeting of the Istanbul Process, the ‘Heart of Asia’ Ministerial Conference, convened on 14 June 2012 in Kabul, re-affirmed the commitments enshrined in the 2002 Kabul Declaration of Good Neighbourly Relations and in the document on principles stipulated in the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan.

The narrative has thus been gradually shifting to regional confidence-building, development, governance, and most lately, trade, transit and investment, aiming to use the country’s resource- and transit- potential to build its economic viability, sustainability and self- reliance. To a large extent, the genesis of this thinking is based on the inadequacies of the security-dominated approach of the last decade. The discovery of huge reserves of minerals and natural gas has raised hopes of possibility of revenue generation, foreign investment and employment

⁵⁰ Haroun Mir, ‘Is Regional Consensus on Afghanistan Possible?’ in Shanthie Mariet D’Souza (ed.) *Afghanistan in Transition: Beyond 2014?*, (New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2012).

⁵¹ Author’s interview with Javed Ludin, Deputy Foreign Minister, Government of Afghanistan, Kabul, 30 June 2012.

opportunities. To what extent these strategies can overcome the need to bring in security remains to be seen.

The Afghanistan International Investment Conference of 30 November 2010 held in Dubai and the Brussels Euro Mines Conference of 26 October 2011, aimed at promoting economic investment in Afghanistan, made valuable recommendations, but they essentially put the onus for investment on actions to be initiated by Afghanistan. The 28 June 2012 Delhi Summit, taking into consideration the realities and needs on the ground, explored near-term and long-term possibilities in the current environment and at the same time, sought a mechanism to address the needs of foreign and private sector investors and the government of Afghanistan. This is reflective in the efforts geared to catalyse investment decisions and forge cross-country and international partnerships to promote cooperation and greater collective confidence. A collective view of security for foreign investors would emerge from the reality of venturing together, rather than individual investors risking an uncertain environment all by themselves.

The long term economic benefits, revenue and employment opportunities arising out of investment, trade and transit would help build ‘constituencies of peace’. The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) pipeline is another regional collaborative venture that has enormous potential of bringing in economic dividends through mutually beneficial regional cooperation. By forging a greater stake and regional commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan through alternate economic opportunities, foreign investment and local development strategies, capitalising on Afghanistan’s location, energy and mineral resources in a mutually interdependent regional framework, could pave the way out of the stability-instability paradox.

Not all is lost in Afghanistan. As Afghanistan traverses a difficult course of transition, there is an immediate need to bridge the perception gap between the Afghans and the international community to build on the gains and address the immediate areas of concern. In the decade-long international involvement, a unified vision and effort of putting Afghans in the lead for rebuilding their state and society remains the missing link in the stabilisation efforts. It is critical to rectify this trajectory and set realistic timetables on drawdown based on conditions on the ground. The gains made thus far are substantial but remain fragile. Unless critical efforts are made to shore up the state’s institutions and capacities before the drawdown date of 2014 and unless long-term international commitment, a unified strategic communications strategy and regional cooperation is guaranteed, stability in Afghanistan would remain a distant dream.

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