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VOICES
FROM THE FIELD

Toward a Successful Outcome in Afghanistan

By General John R. Allen, USMC (Ret.); Michèle Flournoy;
and Michael O'Hanlon



Center for a
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Security

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Cover Image

Afghan army commandos stand on a sand bank as a U.S. army Apache helicopter flies above at sunset in Marjah's Balakino Bazar neighborhood in February 2010.

(PATRICK BAZ/AFP/Getty Images)

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SUMMARY

The United States can still achieve its strategic objectives in Afghanistan if it maintains and adequately resources its current policy course – and if Afghan partners in particular do their part, including by successfully navigating the shoals of their presidential election and transition in 2014. The core reasons for this judgment are the impressive progress of the Afghan security forces and the significant strides made in areas such as agriculture, health and education, combined with the promising pool of human capital that is increasingly influential within the country and that may be poised to gain greater influence in the country's future politics. However, the United States and other international security and development partners would risk snatching defeat from the jaws of something that could still resemble victory if, due to frustration with President Hamid Karzai or domestic budgetary pressures, they were to accelerate disengagement between now and 2014 and under-resource their commitment to Afghanistan after 2014.

Afghan partners need to understand their role in this process, too, for the international support on which they depend will surely be contingent on a reasonable level of electoral integrity and political progress. Pakistan has an important role to play as well, in its willingness to pressure the Taliban sanctuaries still allowed to exist on its soil – though Islamabad's present activities, however regrettable in some ways, may not in themselves be enough to derail the mission.

It is highly desirable that Washington and Kabul clarify and solidify their commitment to an enduring partnership as soon as possible. This would reduce incentives for hedging behavior in Afghanistan and Pakistan and contribute to a constructive atmosphere for the campaigns leading up to the crucial April 2014 Afghan presidential election.

Introduction

Although media coverage of the war has led many Americans to believe that Afghanistan is a lost cause, this is not the case. It is true that the war has been a long, hard slog, by far the longest in U.S. history (and three times as long for Afghans as for Americans, since today's fight logically connects back to the Soviet invasion in 1979). It is also true that the U.S./NATO-led mission has achieved only partial results, when measured against the initial goals of President George W. Bush during his stewardship of the war effort or the goals of President Barack Obama early in his time in office. Leaving aside former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates' apt warning that the United States would not achieve "Valhalla" in the Hindu Kush, there have been far more fundamental problems. In particular, corruption in Kabul has remained very serious, Pakistan's cooperation with the war effort has been fickle and the enemy has proved quite resilient.

However, the United States has wound up with a reasonable "Plan B" for achieving its core objective of preventing Afghanistan from once again becoming a safe haven for al Qaeda and its affiliates. This plan is not guaranteed to work, of course, and whatever its short-term gains, it cannot hold up over time unless there is at least some further progress on the broader political and strategic challenges mentioned above. But in fact, the development of the Afghan security forces, combined with the gradual emergence of a new generation of remarkable Afghan reformers working across many sectors of society, hold out great hope for this troubled land.

While the surge has not achieved everything originally envisioned, the United States can still likely meet its fundamental objectives by continuing to work with partners to degrade the Taliban-led insurgency and create a strong enough Afghan state to hold the country intact. President Obama has been careful to articulate a clear and limited set of objectives for Afghanistan, and these are still

largely within reach – even if at greater cost and with somewhat more fragility than initially hoped.

Future American policy should therefore be motivated not by a desire to cut losses but with a determination to lock in hard-fought gains.

The Security Situation

Although the Taliban insurgency remains resilient, particularly in the east and south, and though it retains its sanctuary in Pakistan, its momentum on the ground in Afghanistan has stalled. The insurgency is still capable of high-profile suicide bombings, small-scale attacks and intimidation tactics at the local level, but it has not succeeded in winning over Afghan hearts and minds or expanding control and influence over the country's major populated areas.

Moreover, the Taliban's shift to more brutal tactics, such as assassinations of Afghan officials and perceived government or foreign collaborators, is having a polarizing impact. Specifically, it is engendering harsh retaliation measures by some Afghan power brokers and creating the conditions for anti-Taliban uprisings. These include local movements in places such as Zhary and Panjwa'i, in western Kandahar province, and Andar, in Ghazni province between Kabul and Kandahar.

At this stage of the war, the central security question is: Have the United States and its partners degraded the Taliban enough and built the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to be strong enough so the insurgency no longer poses a threat of overrunning the central government? The short answer is: yes, for the most part, though there is still a ways to go. Some 80 percent of the population is now largely protected from Taliban violence, which is increasingly limited to the country's more remote regions. Nearly half of the country's violence is concentrated in just 17 of the country's 400 or so districts. In addition, almost all of the country's major cities are now secured by the Afghan security forces rather

than foreign troops – and the biggest cities have all seen substantial further improvements in security in the last year. Life is generally buzzing in these places; the war is a concern, but not the predominant reality in people's daily lives.

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Certainly, where the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) has shown itself to be corrupt, feckless or absent, the Taliban has gained or maintained influence. But it no longer has the strength to threaten or overthrow the Afghan government. Indeed, the greatest threat to GIROA is probably not the insurgency but GIROA itself, and the risk that key power brokers will seek to rig the coming election.

To be sure, there are indicators that suggest cause for concern. On a recent trip, two of us saw at least four International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and intelligence community maps of the country, broken down province by province or district by district and not all were equally reassuring. They did not openly contradict one another, as they were seeking to gauge slightly different things, and in fact

it was healthy that they acknowledged uncertainty and disagreement rather than trying to impose happy talk or optimistic assessments throughout the military command and intelligence agencies. Still, without going into classified detail, it can be acknowledged that some suggested threats near big cities and major roads, even if others were more reassuring. Also, there is good reason to think that many Taliban, having survived more than a decade of attacks by the greatest military alliance in world history, are feeling encouraged and confident as NATO and other ISAF troops largely redeploy by the end of next year. The Taliban probably expect the government to collapse from within just as the Najibullah government did more than two decades ago, after the Soviet withdrawal.

But for all the problems afflicting this government, today's GIROA is nothing like the communist stooge regime imposed by the Soviets. It is a deeply flawed but clearly independent entity. It is elected, even if the elections were less than free and fair. Its president scores reasonably well on public opinion surveys (typically enjoying 60 to 70 percent popularity) even if many also criticize Karzai for his administration's shortcomings. It is representative of all major ethnic groups, with a Pashtun president, interior minister, finance minister and foreign minister; a Tajik first vice president and minister of defense; a Hazara second vice president; and an Uzbek minister of mines, among others. And the government is about to step down from office as the country's constitution requires it to do next year.

Perhaps most of all, the government has, with ISAF help, created a multiethnic army and police force that fight hard for their country as a relatively

cohesive whole. Several Afghans, including strong critics of the current government, described the security forces to us in private meetings as "our national pride." Normal Afghan citizens agree; Asia Foundation annual surveys routinely show the army in particular to enjoy more than 80 percent favorability ratings. Western sensibilities may not prefer the idea of a nation held together largely by the strength of its armed forces. But in fact this is a time-tested path that states from Turkey to South Korea to Colombia have followed at certain stages of their development. And there is good reason to think Afghanistan may do so successfully as well.

The development of the ANSF, especially the Afghan National Army (ANA), has been fundamentally underreported in the Western press. But ANSF has made serious strides in taking the lead for the country's security in the last half-decade or so:¹

- Afghan forces are now responsible for security for 87 percent of the population, in 312 out of some 400 total districts nationwide.
- About 85 percent of military operations in the country are now Afghan-led.
- Roughly 80 percent of patrols are now independent of ISAF help; most ANSF units are planning and executing operations largely on their own, and this year's campaign plan was written principally by Afghans.
- ANSF personnel are now taking at least 75 percent of all casualties.
- 80-85 percent of ANSF training is Afghan-led.
- There has been success in establishing control over key cities and significant lines of communication; most Taliban violence has been pushed farther away from population centers.

1. Department of Defense, "Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress in Accordance with Section 1230 of the National Defense Authorization Act for 2008, December 2012, pp. 20, 40, 46; Briefing at ISAF NTM-A, Kabul, Afghanistan, March 16, 2013; Briefings at ISAF Headquarters, Kabul, Afghanistan, March 10 and 13, 2013; Briefing at ISAF RC-East Command, Kandahar, Afghanistan, March 14, 2013; Briefing at ISAF Combined Joint Special Operations Command, Kabul, Afghanistan, March 11, 2013; and Statement of General Joseph Dunford, Commander, International Security Assistance Force, before the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 16, 2013.

- Afghan units are becoming increasingly proficient in countering roadside bombs or improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In Regional Command-South, ANSF now has a 72 percent success rate in finding and clearing IEDs. This is due less to high-technology equipment than to an increase in tips from the local population.
- Most Afghan Army Corps commands (the 201st and 203rd in the east, the 205th in and around Kandahar, the 215th in Helmand, the 207th in the west and the 209th in the north) are now implementing an operational readiness cycle for their soldiers to allow for predictable leave periods and thereby to reduce attrition (otherwise known as AWOL) rates.
- The Ministers of Defense and Interior, with strengthened focus, are in the process of replacing or removing Afghan security force leadership that has proved incompetent or corrupt.
- We have heard numerous U.S. field-level commanders say that “Afghans are far better fighters than Iraqis.”
- While logistical support remains a huge challenge for Afghans, who are not used to the idea of making requests or delivering orders up and down a chain of bureaucratic or military command, there is progress. In the south, for example, Afghan units have been resupplying themselves without significant ISAF help since December.
- ANSF special operations forces, within the Ministries of Defense and Interior, have achieved a very high level of competence and are increasingly capable of conducting sophisticated special operations.

These kinds of specific improvements collectively have enabled a broader positive trend: Different elements of the ANSF are starting to work together more cohesively and often without ISAF support. One detects the beginning of a layered security concept. The army clears insurgent strongholds (sometimes now without much ISAF

help). The Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), an elite set of units with gendarme-like qualities, then moves in and establishes stability. Over time they hand off to regular Afghan uniformed police – admittedly still the weak link in the chain in many areas.

In remote areas, this pattern may be altered somewhat. The first stages may be similar, but then the army or the ANCOP hand off responsibilities to what are known as Afghan Local Police (ALP), essentially armed community-watch organizations of 200 to 300 locals each. This approach may increase further in 2013. Most Afghan commanders like the ALP concept enough that they are building it into their campaign plans for the coming year and planning to use it as their “hold” force in certain remote but important areas of the country.

There are admittedly problems with some ALP. They can be undisciplined; in a worst case, they can reinforce tribal factionalism and rivalry in a given area. Questions about the ALP will only grow, in some cases, as the American special operations forces teams that have been working with them to date gradually come home or are re-missioned in the next couple of years. But the ALP continue to inspire fear in the Taliban perhaps more than any other part of the ANSF, and suffer more attacks accordingly. This is perhaps because the Taliban recognize that the ALP deprive them of their fictional but powerful narrative that the existing Afghan government and its security forces are illegitimate concoctions of foreign occupiers having little to do with traditional Afghan mores. As such, while the idea of expanding the ALP from the present planned end strength of some 30,000 “guardians” to as many as 45,000 will have to be handled with care, and while a few problematic ALP units may need to be reformed or even disbanded, what the United States should be doing in general is helping ALP be more effective and more tightly managed. This requires better integration with district chiefs of police in some places and greater programmatic oversight by the Afghan Ministry of

Interior as the U.S. role declines. The decision for the centralization of ALP training in the regional training centers should go a long way to professionalizing the force.

Rounding out the picture, the Afghan border police work the country's borders, and the Afghan air force provides limited air support. These organizations are not as central to the population's daily security. But they need improvement just the same, as they are still afflicted by too much corruption and inadequate capacity.

For the most part, though, the ANSF are working well as a team. All of these cooperative efforts are now mapped out in joint campaign plans, too. And when crises arise, the ANSF employ Operational Coordination Centers in the various provinces to coordinate across elements. We know many examples of forces coming to one another's aid without ISAF involvement, and at least two examples from the south just this year that involved hundreds of personnel being rapidly moved about by ground vehicles and helicopters.

The Political Situation

In the American media coverage of the war, all eyes tend to be on Karzai and the crises of the day. But the real make-or-break political event for Afghanistan will likely be the 2014 election. An illegitimate process or outcome could polarize the country ethnically, spark a descent into civil war and so frustrate outside donors that they cut off aid or downsize substantially their long-term security commitments. A legitimate process and solid outcome could make Afghans, who feel great pride in their country, commit further to building up their nation after a generation of warfare and uncertainty. Already, most Afghans are encouraged by the enormous progress that has occurred in the last dozen years, with GDP growth rates averaging 8 to 10 percent annually and many improvements in the quality of life as well – and they generally do not want to lose these gains.

If Afghans fail to secure the election, hold a fraudulent election or elect a corrupt future leader, the odds of the U.S. Congress providing the expected aid are slim.

In light of this situation, what should be the international community's role during the next 12 months? Although the United States and other key outside nations should not and will not try to pick a winner, America should do what it can to ensure that the next election is freer and fairer than the last. Since the United States has promised at least \$5 billion a year in future aid (for half a decade or more) and is considering spending \$10 billion a year or more on a post-2014 military presence, Americans have a stake in the electoral process and outcome. The aid figures are based in part on the commitments made in Tokyo last summer by Washington and other key capitals, as well as the existing plan to keep Afghan security forces around their current level of 352,000 personnel through 2018 or so at an annual cost of about \$5 billion in total – expensive, to be sure, but roughly half the annual costs the United States has been incurring to build the force in recent years, and only about 5 percent the pace of recent American military expenditures.

If Afghans fail to secure the election, hold a fraudulent election or elect a corrupt future leader, the odds of the U.S. Congress providing the expected aid are slim. This is also the case for other countries. Washington should, therefore, voice its views now rather than simply cut off aid later if the election goes badly (or if the election is canceled or

overturned by a coup – unlikely but not unthinkable outcomes that the United States also needs to contemplate).

As Afghans remember, the Soviet-installed government of Mohammad Najibullah fell not when the Soviet Union left Afghanistan in 1989 but when Moscow withdrew its advisers and cut off the money three years later. When the Taliban overran Kabul in 1996, Najibullah was tortured and murdered. All too aware of this history, Afghan reformers, opposition politicians and members of civil society are asking Americans and others to help them make their election a success.

No one has yet announced a candidacy for next year's election, but many names are being floated. They include current or former chiefs of staff to the president, Karzai's brother Qayum, Minister of Education Ghulam Farooq Wardak, Minister of Finance Omar Zakhilwel, Foreign Minister Zalmai Rassoul, former Foreign Minister and presidential candidate Abdullah Abdullah and former Minister of Interior Haneef Atmar. The above names are Pashtun, but any plausible candidate would likely announce a multiethnic team, starting with his two vice presidents, before the actual vote.

There is a good deal of talk now in Kabul and other places about the desirability of finding a "consensus" candidate or slate. The idea is to use Afghanistan's consultative traditions to avoid a divisive election while the country's democracy is still so fragile.

This is a reasonable and even appealing idea in theory. In practice, however, it risks having Hamid Karzai play the role of kingmaker, since it is hard to see how a consensus would otherwise develop in a place with such strong political rivalries and with so many people clearly angling to be president. The devil will be in the details of a consensus candidate – or, perhaps more accurately, a consensus slate of candidates for various jobs within a new government.

With this in mind, the international community can help by focusing on a few goals:

First, it should remind Afghans that Americans and others will exercise their own sovereign rights to determine future aid levels once Afghanistan exercises its sovereign right to choose a new leader. The quality of the election process and the quality of the new president's leadership will both affect decisions on aid. This is just common sense, not a threat.

Second, the international community should help ensure the independence and integrity of the Afghan watchdog groups charged with overseeing the electoral process. For all the criticism of past Afghan elections, it was these Afghan groups – the Independent Election Commission and the Electoral Complaints Commission – that uncovered the fraud and threw out the bad ballots in 2009 and 2010. Internationals did far less in these regards. Whether or not they include foreigners, future appointees to the commissions should be selected with the input of parliament, and Hamid Karzai should not be able to dismiss them once appointed. This issue is more important than many others currently being debated in Kabul, including redoing voter registration and issuing new voter cards.

Third, the international community should watch carefully how the election campaigns play out starting later this year. Afghan state media need to give reasonable time to all candidates, including the opposition. Vote-buying and voter intimidation need to be deterred and prevented through timely investigations of allegations. The electoral commissions will do the investigating, but the international community must stand behind them. To that end the principal role of ISAF during the election will be to enable and assist the ANSF to take the lead in securing the electoral process, by not only fighting to spoil and disrupt potential Taliban interference in the election, but also securing the balloting itself as Afghan citizens go to the polls.

Fourth, the international community should give technical, moral and if necessary financial support to fledgling Afghan political parties – provided they have inclusive, multiethnic memberships and platforms and promise to eschew violence. The United States and others should encourage the Afghans to develop platforms based on ideas rather than personalities or patronage networks alone. Among some of the good ideas Afghans have floated in recent years are direct elections for provincial governors, reform of the voting system (away from the “single nontransferable vote” method now used) and creation of regional economic and educational hubs (since Afghanistan’s administrative units are too subdivided for most planning and development purposes, with provinces and districts too small to constitute a reasonable locus for activity).

Fifth, when U.S. officials visit Afghanistan, they should meet not only with members of the executive branch but also with a broad range of Afghan politicians and civil-society members, particularly next-generation representatives, who are the real hope for the country’s future.

American passivity in the coming Afghan elections could be just as counterproductive as certain aspects of perceived American assertiveness (including some nasty public spats with Hamid Karzai) were last time around. The verdict on the war in Afghanistan may be settled less on the country’s battlefields than at its polling stations next spring.

With regard to politics, two other key matters require some attention – the question of possible peace talks with the Taliban and the question of how to deal with Pakistan, an off-again, on-again supporter of the war effort overall. In fact, these questions are inherently intertwined.

Working with Afghans and Pakistanis, the United States needs to develop a clearer sense of

what reconciliation with elements of the Taliban could involve. Although Washington has at times signaled that a peace deal is the only way out of the war with honor, its talks with the Taliban got bogged down in technicalities of small prisoner exchanges and remain stalled.

No high-level peace deal with the Quetta Shura Taliban seems likely. Mullah Omar and company remain hardline, and they probably remain optimistic about their prospects for military victory once the ISAF mission ends. That said, many Taliban leaders are perhaps getting tired of living abroad, subject to Pakistani control, and some may sense that NATO is not really planning to leave after 2014 – an impression the United States should seek to strengthen soon (as discussed further below).

One way to give a new boost to reconciliation is to seek out insurgent commanders who are willing to stop fighting in exchange for positions in district-level or provincial-level government. Any such rehabilitated Taliban would have to agree to eschew violence, abide by the Afghan Constitution and implement clear and verifiable disarmament provisions for their associated militias. Akin to the current process of “reintegration,” a process that has seen more than 6,000 former Taliban fighters call it quits and go home, placing these former insurgent leaders in positions of responsibility brings the Taliban into the mainstream of Afghan society, where they can be part of the long-term solution. Funds for local economic activities could be used by Kabul for subsequent leverage as well. This pocketbook approach to enforcing respect for central authority is of course a time-honored Afghan method.

As for Pakistan’s motives and goals, Islamabad and Washington have had such a troubled history that there is deep distrust and even a degree of pathology in the relationship. That helps explain why some in Pakistan, fearful of future

Pakistan is, and will remain, a major player in the final outcome in Afghanistan, and Washington's approach in this situation should be to continue to work on interpersonal relationships among key leaders, as well as coordination and cooperation along borders where enemies of one country or the other often cross.

Indian dominance of the wrong type of Afghan government and dubious that the United States and its partners will really remain committed to Afghanistan's future stability, continue to hedge by supporting the Taliban as an insurance policy even now. There may be other Pakistani motives at work in the nation's Afghanistan policy, too, including the hegemonic desire to dominate a smaller neighbor. In fairness, it is unclear how much influence and/or control Pakistan can really exert over Taliban elements in Pakistan.

But the truth is still this: Pakistan is, and will remain, a major player in the final outcome in Afghanistan, and Washington's approach in this situation should be to continue to work on interpersonal relationships among key leaders, as well as coordination and cooperation along borders where enemies of one country or the other often cross. These things should be done in tandem with Afghan leaders at every step. Beyond that, measures toward

deeper economic integration may be possible with Pakistan (such as a free trade accord or aid for a regional energy sector) – provided that Islamabad takes significant and effective steps to restrain the Afghan Taliban operating from sanctuaries on its soil. Realistically, this agenda may not yield great fruit by the end of 2014, but it is still the right way to play for the long run.

Conclusion: 2015 and Beyond

With his decision to reduce U.S. forces in Afghanistan by half between February 2013 and February 2014, President Obama answered most remaining questions about American military strength in Afghanistan through the end of the ISAF mission in December 2014. Most of the planned reductions from the current strength of some 66,000 American troops to 34,000 will occur this upcoming fall and winter. After that, the force levels will probably hold relatively steady through the Afghan elections in April and perhaps a bit longer, before the drawdown to the “Enduring Force” begins in late summer or fall of next year. Already, the U.S. force presence is focused on supporting the ANSF – American brigade combat teams and Marine regiments have been replaced now by security force assistance brigades, which essentially oversee, support and help enable the work of individual small-unit security force assistance teams working with individual Afghan units.

But there are still a number of critical questions to be worked through, some military and others political. Specifically:

- What will the Enduring Force do and how large should it be in 2015 and beyond?
- Should the United States move straight to the Enduring Force, or have a somewhat larger “bridging force” for two to three years after 2014?
- How many allied forces are needed? What is politically realistic in various foreign capitals, especially in Europe?

- Should the ANSF be sustained at the level of 352,000 personnel beyond 2015? Say, to 2018 or 2020?
- What should come first, a clear U.S. commitment to a given Enduring Force (premised on reasonable Afghan elections and governance), or a deal on legal immunity for American troops through the so-called Bilateral Security Accord?

On the last point, we favor stating the rough contours of an American force soon. Actual deployment of any such force would of course be contingent on an acceptable immunity/status of forces agreement down the road. But clarifying the U.S. commitment would make it clear to Afghans that only their own reluctance, and specifically that of the Karzai government, stands in the way of firming up the partnership. Given Afghanistan's historical fear of abandonment, we believe the psychology of such a clear American commitment of intent would be all to the good. It would also help persuade NATO allies to firm up their own plans. This does not mean that the United States should convey impatience to conclude a Bilateral Security Accord on a rushed basis, which would potentially weaken Washington's negotiating position (since some Afghans wrongly believe that the United States desperately wants bases on their nation's territory for broader regional purposes in multiple directions). But being clear about the nature of our commitment would serve American national security interests if Afghans do their part, too.

As for what the Enduring Force package should include, the United States needs several things as a matter of prudence. First, there should be enough force to advise and assist the ANSF effectively, including geographic distribution to cover the ANA corps in Kabul and the "four corners" of the country, and capacity to get below the Afghan Corps level with mobile teams if necessary, to support Afghan brigades in pre-operational preparations, and should problems develop here or there.

For two to three years after 2014, the United States may need an additional force package of several thousand personnel to help the Afghans finish building their air force, their special operations forces and certain other enablers in medical realms, in counter-IED capability and in intelligence collection.

In the country's north and west in particular, there should be enough enablers to keep U.S. allies in the game, as their logistics capabilities are not adequate to sustain small forces without modest U.S. help. (Germany and Italy seem ready to step up with their contributions, for example, but need assurance of certain U.S. support.) Of course the United States needs counterterrorism capabilities, for strikes within Afghanistan or in some cases along the border. Finally, for two to three years after 2014, the United States may need an additional force package of several thousand personnel to help the Afghans finish building their air force, their special operations forces and certain other enablers in medical realms, in counter-IED capability and in intelligence collection. This might be viewed as an additional bridging force, above and beyond the Enduring Force.

To achieve this, the United States should deploy an Enduring Force sized and shaped for these tasks after 2014. It is not our purpose to recommend a specific figure now, and in fact a band of numbers

is probably acceptable, as suggested by some of the parameters staked out in the recent public debate on this subject – though greater risk would be associated with smaller force sizes. With clear U.S. commitments, allies would likely contribute an additional 3,000 to 5,000 uniformed personnel themselves.

Despite the near-term challenges in realms ranging from security to corruption to narcotics to difficult neighbors, we are fundamentally optimistic about Afghanistan's mid- to long-term future. The greatest cause for hope is the next generation. Youth make up 60 percent of Afghanistan's population, and they are being educated in unprecedented numbers. Some 180,000 students are in university this year, with nearly 10 million overall in school. Beyond the numbers, there is the passion, the commitment, the patriotism and the resilience that distinguishes this community of remarkable individuals, many of whom we have been lucky to meet and work with through the years.

In Afghanistan, many of these next-generation leaders have formed a "1400 group," based on the Afghan Islamic calendar (it is now 1392, so 1400 is roughly the time when this new generation will begin to step up to run the nation). They include individuals who left Afghanistan during the wars of the last 30 years, as well as some who stayed; they include activists and members of civil society, as well as professionals and technocrats; they include Pashtuns and Tajiks and Hazaras and Uzbeks and others, though all tend to see themselves first and foremost as Afghans. And it is their own country that they now want to rebuild. Most encouraging, perhaps, is the growing role of women in Afghan society. Girls make up about 40 percent of this new generation of students, and women are an increasingly important voice speaking on behalf of minority rights, countering corruption and embracing the rule of law. From our experience in other post-conflict societies, countries able to assimilate women into the mainstream of society were far

better able to transition into developing societies. Without the Afghan women playing a major role in the future of Afghanistan, we are not optimistic real reform can occur in this traditional society.

Despite its promise, one cannot forget, of course, that Afghanistan will remain one of the poorest, least developed and more corrupt countries in the world for years to come. But the United States and its partners, which have invested and sacrificed so much, have a chance to ensure that the land of the Hindu Kush does not return to being a safe haven for international terrorists and that it stays on the path toward greater stability, as well as human and economic development. Compared to what the international community has collectively invested already, in blood and treasure, the costs associated with this future effort to lock in gains seem a wise investment.

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