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It's Time to Invest in Afghanistan's Long-Term Human Security

To Jorrit Kamminga, Afghanistan's recent presidential elections and the continued professionalization of its security forces confirm a little appreciated truth — the country has laid the foundations for sustainable progress. That's why it's time for cash-strapped governments to invest in its human security once again.

By Jorrit Kamminga for ISN

Afghanistan, once again? Haven't we already moved on to other conflicts? Unfortunately many politicians and media outlets have already. Yet the time to invest in the country's human security is now, especially because the recent presidential elections and the training of Afghan security forces have laid the foundations for sustainable progress in Afghanistan – provided we stay the course.

Staying on the Map

Syria, Iraq, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Mali: just a handful of the countries where recent crises have competed for international attention and support. One important consequence is that Afghanistan is slowly falling off the international map. The international public has moved on and for most of the more than fifty countries that have been working in Afghanistan during the past thirteen years, the end of the [security transition process](#) marks more the end of structural engagement with the country rather than the start of renewed commitment.

Amid low-level incidents of violence, two rounds of presidential elections have recently been held in Afghanistan. These elections were not completely [free, fair or democratic](#) when compared to Western standards, but their mere celebration is a sign of progress. Whether Abdullah Abdullah or Ashraf Ghani will become the next president is not even the key issue – what matters is that the result will produce a relatively stable political environment in Kabul that the international community should use as a starting point for renewed long-term commitment to Afghanistan.

Nevertheless, it is easy to underestimate the importance of these elections when looking at the overall assessment of progress that policy makers and the military have often called “[fragile and not irreversible](#).” Progress is often expressed in more tangible results such as the amount of girls in Afghan schools or the reduction in the country's maternal mortality rate. But it is political progress that makes results in, for example, the domain of women's rights sustainable.

Faced with a sharp decrease in popular support for the international mission in Afghanistan, this

important message is often lost in the midst of popular rhetoric about ' [the return of the Taliban](#) ' or the even blunter 'things will never work out in Afghanistan.' In fact, there is a real chance that the current presidential elections have put a permanent stop to the Taliban's ambitions ('Taliban' used here as a generic term for the diverse insurgent groups operating in Afghanistan) of ever regaining control over Afghanistan as they had during the 1990s. Not only did they fail in the past two fighting seasons to book strategic victories against the now almost entirely independently operating Afghan National Security Forces, they tried very hard to sabotage two rounds of presidential elections – and failed.

In addition to the first democratically elected president in Afghanistan, this is another legacy of the international community's support to Afghanistan over the past thirteen years. The frequent elephant in the room, however, is that the roughly 350,000 Afghan security forces are still almost entirely funded by the international community. For the foreseeable future, the biggest guarantor for security and stability in Afghanistan remains dependent on foreign funding, which automatically gives the international community a huge role to play in Afghanistan beyond 2014. The problem is that necessary funding already [falls short](#) and it is unclear how long foreign donors are willing to pay these substantial costs.

The growing army of sceptics of continued foreign investment in Afghanistan points to the fact that the end of 2014 is a perfect moment to put an end to one of the most expensive international operations of all times. The security forces have been trained and a new president will have been chosen in more or less free democratic elections. Let's pack up and go home. These sceptics not only have a poor understanding of Afghanistan's history but also fail to grasp that we have now reached a relatively stable situation that can serve as a foundation for finally achieving what the entire international community has committed to after the start of the operations in 2001: sustainable progress that ensures that the country can never again be used as a [safe haven for international terrorists](#). The current situation in Iraq is a sad reminder of the need for long-term commitment.

Staying in Place

The end of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) at the close of 2014 should therefore not mark the end of international engagement and commitment, but finally bring the international community to a more productive, civilian-led relationship with Afghanistan. [Disconnecting civilian power from the military approach](#) that has dominated international relations with Afghanistan since 2001 will allow the establishment of a more positive and natural relationship with the country. It will facilitate greater investment in [human security](#) outside the military framework. The only catch is that civilian power can only truly boost levels of human security in Afghanistan if it is backed by enough financial resources.

Rebalancing international support towards a civilian-led focus on long-term development cooperation and human security is a logical step to take, but it does not mean abandoning all forms of military assistance. Especially when it comes to continued training of the Afghan security forces, the international community has a huge role to play in coming years. As the focus of training has already shifted from quantity to quality in recent years, there are great opportunities to deepen institutional investments and link up continued training and capacity building with more structural reforms at the Afghan Ministries of Defense and Interior.

What changes is that the Afghan people can finally be at the center of the international community's support role. The focus on human security has so far been very narrow – focusing especially on personal security and the threats of violence and insecurity related to the Taliban insurgency (so-called ' [freedom from fear](#) '). The post-ISAF policy environment moves away from the dominant counter-insurgency and military framework and allows for a much broader focus of human security as

an independent force for good, including socio-economic development, job opportunities, access to education and health care. In other words, it allows for a structural shift from protective security to human development.

Staying the Course

With the exception of structural improvements in security, Afghanistan has seen some astonishing [progress](#) in the past thirteen years. But just looking at persistent problems such as low illiteracy rates, extreme poverty, child labor, inadequate access to water and an extremely high maternal mortality rate makes clear that the international community should not focus too much on the achievements since 2001. The focus should instead be on the titanic challenges ahead and the role the international community should and can play during the next decade or two to boost human security.

But that requires bold decisions in the foreign capitals of many countries that have taken part in ISAF. Faced with the twin problem of decreased public support and increased financial constraints, governments need to convince their parliaments and public that a solid long-term commitment to Afghanistan is the only way to make a real difference to the lives of the Afghan people. Continued investment in the Afghan security sector is important (e.g. in the form of strong commitment and support to NATO's new training mission next year), but the much broader deployment of civilian power directed towards structural improvements of human security should finally take center stage.

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Dr. Jorrit Kamminga is Visiting Fellow at the Netherlands Institute of International Relations Clingendael. He has been working on and off in Afghanistan since 2005. His latest trip to Afghanistan was at the end of last year with NATO's Transatlantic Opinion Leaders to Afghanistan (TOLA) tour.

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ISN, Center for Security Studies (CSS), ETH Zurich, Switzerland