



# Atlantic Council

## SOUTH ASIA CENTER

# Afghanistan and US Security

## OCTOBER 2015

America's engagement in Afghanistan is rapidly coming to a truly historic fork in the road, as is Afghanistan itself. It usually requires hindsight to identify historical turning points; it is an uncommon thing in international affairs to be able to know ahead of time that history is in the making, and that an inflection point looms. Decisions made in Kabul and Washington over the next few months and years will determine the future of Afghanistan, and will impact stability in a strategic and dangerous region of the world. This has important implications for the United States and its partners. There are choices to be made that will lead to one course or another. The right choices will protect the investment and sacrifice of both countries and international partners at a time when prospects for success are real, if challenged, and when Afghanistan's government is committed to change. Over time, the United States has the opportunity to achieve a foreign policy success story in a part of the world where it is sorely needed.

Down one road, there is the prospect for continued success in the strategy that the two countries and their unprecedentedly vast network of international partners are pursuing. There can be continued development and enhanced stability, as well as partnership in containing and defeating the virulent extremism that festers in the region and threatens the United States and much of the world. There can finally be peace for the Afghan people. Down that road lies the possibility of an Afghanistan that becomes an element for stability in both its own region and the Islamic world.

Down the other road is an Afghanistan in the process of failing, and the virtual certainty of the dissolution of that which we in the United States, our international partners, and the Afghans have achieved together at great cost and effort. Such an Afghanistan becomes a dangerous threat to the stability of its region and to security, including American security.

Both the Bush and Obama administrations, together with NATO and coalition partners, have consistently

The **Afghanistan Rising Initiative** seeks to solidify international support for Afghanistan as the new government takes steps necessary to meet the country's security, development, and economic challenges. It will convene thought leaders and policy-makers from all over the world to help clarify issues and policy options, to generate public and political support for continued investment, and to sustain and accelerate the momentum required to generate impactful change in the country. This initiative is supported by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and led by Ambassador James B. Cunningham, former Ambassador to Afghanistan, Senior Fellow and Khalilzad Chair, South Asia Center.

affirmed that Afghanistan's security and stability are directly linked with international security. The reason the United States went to Afghanistan in the first place was to defend the nation and to ensure that Afghanistan is never again a refuge from which terrorists attack the United States. That is the standard to which we should hold as we look to Afghanistan's future stability.

## US INTERESTS AND THE THREAT

Fourteen years after the September 11, 2001 attacks that took the United States to Afghanistan in the first place, it is entirely correct to ask if Afghanistan still matters. And does it matter enough to justify continued personal sacrifice and financial, political, military, and intelligence investment? We firmly believe that it does. The United States' continued engagement with Afghanistan, along with a sustained counterterrorism partnership with intelligence and military cooperation, protects the United States from the evolving terrorist threat in the region. That engagement must be seen as part of a long-term, multilateral, and multifaceted strategy and effort to deal with the threat to our way of life and our people from violent extremism and the terror it spawns. Across the Bush and Obama

## ENDORSEMENTS

*It is the core purpose of the Atlantic Council to foster bipartisan support for policies that promote the security of the United States and the transatlantic community. We, the undersigned, have either served in Afghanistan, been involved in the formation of US policy in government, or otherwise devoted considerable time to Afghan affairs. We have come together to register a broad, bipartisan consensus in support of certain principles that we believe should guide policy formation and decision-making on Afghanistan during the remainder of the Obama administration and the first year of a new administration, of whichever party. It is critical that the current administration prepare the path for the next. A new president will come into office facing a wave of instability in the Islamic world and the threat from violent extremism, which stretches from Asia through the Middle East to Africa. This will continue to pose a considerable challenge and danger to American interests abroad, and to the homeland. We support the continued US engagement required to protect American interests and increase the possibilities for Afghan success.*

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\* The Hon. James B. Cunningham served as principal author of this publication.

administrations, the strategic goal in Afghanistan has been consistent: to disrupt, dismantle, and defeat al-Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent those who would attack the United States from once again using Afghanistan as a safe haven for doing so. This requires an Afghanistan that contributes to security and stability for itself and the region, and one that opposes and confronts Taliban terrorism while remaining determined to cooperate in disrupting and degrading the threat. Now the threat from al-Qaeda and its affiliates in Afghanistan and Pakistan has morphed into a threat from a network of terror groups in the region and beyond, and which today resides in a band of crisis from Asia to North Africa. The problem we as Americans face is not just defeating al-Qaeda or Daesh; it is more fundamental. We in the United States are challenged to defend ourselves and our partners, while helping to develop and implement a long-term strategy for draining the life from the extreme violent ideology and the distorted Islamist fundamentalism that animate al-Qaeda, Daesh, and others in this network. The threat is long term and generational, and the response must be as well. This is a fight which we cannot afford to lose, and which requires a multilateral effort in which the Islamic world must have a lead role. Afghanistan's near and far neighbors (including China, Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan) should be important players as well.

Despite all the challenges in that arc of crisis, we in the United States and our international partners have a strategy in Afghanistan that is working, albeit with difficulty. Very importantly, the United States also has an Islamic partner that understands the threat and the need to take action against it. President Mohammad Ashraf Ghani made an important observation during his March, 2015 visit to Washington, when he described a “new ecology of terrorism” threatening the state system of South and West Asia, China, and Central Asia. He pointed to the responsibility of the Islamic world to rise to the challenge of this phenomenon. In Afghanistan, there exists the possibility to anchor the broader effort to counter extremism in a dangerous region, where it can be contained and ultimately defeated, and with an Islamic partner in the lead. We urge that Pakistan also become such a partner.

That is why success in Afghanistan is so much in the United States' interest, and why failure will be so damaging. Americans have invested tremendously in trying to stabilize Afghanistan as a defense against international terror, and ultimately as a force for stability in a troubled, violent region. Should it come to that, Afghanistan's failure will be seen as the United States' failure, by friends and enemies alike—most particularly, by an extremist ideology that must be smothered, not invigorated.

## WHAT WILL IT TAKE?

It is not our purpose here to present a detailed list of recommendations, but rather to identify a bipartisan framework that will maximize the prospects for protecting American interests. In concert with its Afghan and international partners, whose role must not be underestimated, the United States has accomplished, in whole or in part, much of what it sought to achieve over the past several years.

WE IN THE UNITED STATES ARE CHALLENGED TO DEFEND OURSELVES AND OUR PARTNERS, WHILE HELPING TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A LONG TERM STRATEGY FOR DRAINING THE LIFE FROM THE EXTREME VIOLENT IDEOLOGY AND THE DISTORTED ISLAMIST FUNDAMENTALISM THAT ANIMATE AL-QAEDA, DAESH, AND OTHERS IN THIS NETWORK.

Despite the conflict, Afghanistan's metrics in almost every area of development have moved in the right direction, by leaps and bounds in some cases. Indeed, a 2013 RAND Corporation study,<sup>1</sup> which should have received more attention, examined the pace of recovery from conflict in twenty countries, and found that Afghanistan had one of the highest rates of improvement from 2002 to 2012. The RAND study also concluded that the main criterion

1 RAND Corporation, *Overcoming Obstacles to Peace: Local Factors in Nation-Building*, (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 2013), [http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR100/RR167/RAND\\_RR167.pdf](http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR100/RR167/RAND_RR167.pdf).

for success is the end of conflict, and that the role of a country's neighbors in reaching and preserving peace is critical. To promote stability, the United States and its partners have put in place processes to provide continued development assistance at very significant levels. This will enable the preservation of the strides made in advancing the status of women, in educating Afghanistan's youth, in expanding public health and longevity, in promoting a free press, and in many other areas.

Afghanistan has navigated trying security and political transitions. The United States and Afghanistan reached agreement on a long-term Strategic Partnership Agreement and a Bilateral Security Agreement, which provide for security cooperation, with the flexibility to accommodate a variety of security-assistance and counterterrorism postures. Afghanistan's security forces assumed full responsibility for security throughout the country, and have fought with determination to fulfill that responsibility. Afghanistan conducted two rounds of presidential elections, in which millions of Afghan men and women voted at personal physical risk. Although the elections were marred by fraud and contention, it is undoubtedly the case that millions of valid votes were cast in a rather remarkable exercise of democratic spirit and commitment. Although the outcome was sharply disputed, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah found their way to putting the national interest first and, in a commendable display of leadership and patriotism, formed the National Unity Government, which is the best hope for Afghanistan's unity and its future.

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AND DEMONSTRATE  
ACHIEVEMENT TO ITS  
OWN PEOPLE AND  
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Those accomplishments led to this stage in Afghanistan's history. They give evidence of the unique and unprecedented effort by the international community, based on US leadership and commitment, to make it possible for Afghans to secure their own future. We believe the foundation is in place, and that the Afghan government and people can succeed. It is in the United States' interest to make it possible for them to do so. That will require the realization of two fundamental, complementary goals by Afghanistan's partners and by Afghans themselves, in a sustained and mutually reinforcing fashion.

The first is that there must be clarity that adequate levels of international military, financial, and political support continue, so that the new government and Afghanistan's leaders have the time and space to build on progress made, to solidify their position in Afghanistan and the region, and to move ahead with efforts to implement reform, provide security, and search for peace. Afghanistan is quite properly taking responsibility for its own affairs, but it will require the continued engagement and support of its partners in order to succeed in doing so. If the United States leads in this regard, we have every confidence that the United States' international partners will stand with it.

The second is that the National Unity Government needs to perform, and demonstrate achievement to its own people and the international community. The government has a program of action under the Tokyo Process, which sets goals and obligations. It must also continue, and accelerate, its process of achieving self-reliance, as the role of the international community gradually recedes. Mindful that even mature democracies have difficulty in making coalition governments function, and that the country faces severe challenges, it is nonetheless necessary in political and practical terms that Afghanistan's friends see plainly that progress continues to be made on the security, economic, political, and reform agenda that the government has outlined. That will be critical if Afghanistan is to be seen as a project still worthy of political, financial, and military commitment, and worthy of US and international support.

The **following principles** constitute the framework for the way ahead that, in our view, addresses the core requirements for advancing these two efforts.

### FIRST, SECURITY IS THE FOUNDATION

As a first principle—given today's circumstances and the evolving threat, the need for continued development of key capabilities in the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and the criticality of maintaining a US counterterrorism (CT) mission in Afghanistan—we agree that the Obama administration should provide flexibility,



and not foreclose future options for the next president. US and NATO force levels and presence around the country, as well as intelligence assets, should be maintained at or close to present levels, pending review by the next administration of missions, capabilities, and strategy. Preserving options will forestall the risk of deterioration in Afghanistan just as a new administration is getting its feet on the ground, and will avoid the possibility of a new leadership team having to make crucial decisions before time for reflection.

The proper strategic goal has been to get US forces out of a combat role, and to transfer responsibility for security to the Afghans, where it belongs. That has happened. US forces today, and for most of the past two years, are engaged in training and assistance, force protection, and counterterrorism. By building ANSF strength and capacity, the United States is defending Americans as Afghan forces step up to the challenge of providing security and developing their own CT mission.

To sustain this success, and to secure American interests, clarity of purpose and commitment with regard to Afghanistan's security are essential. In a context where the concern in Afghanistan and the region is that the United States is leaving, the essence of US engagement is embodied in limited, but effective, military support, as it has been in other parts of the world. The ANSF are performing and fighting as a national force, and taking significant casualties while demonstrating cohesion and resilience. No one has been surprised that the fighting this year has been particularly difficult, or that the Taliban is pressing hard against the new government and the ANSF, to see if they will break after the completion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission at the end of 2014. But the ANSF is holding, and will only get better as it goes forward, as long as there is assistance in place to provide needed capabilities, and as long as there is critical confidence in US and international support until the ANSF has such capabilities. There are key gaps in ANSF capability in intelligence, close air support, special operations/counterterrorism, and command and control, which the Afghans cannot close in the next year.

The further withdrawal of US forces from the field, as currently planned, would leave those gaps unfilled and put the ability of the ANSF to succeed at grave risk. It would also vitiate the US counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan, because the military provides critical support for US intelligence capabilities and assets that are carrying out vital CT operations and supporting the Afghans' own CT efforts. Those intelligence capabilities should also be maintained. A deteriorating ANSF, and the decline of US CT operations, would have important implications for the protection of the US and international civilian presence in Afghanistan as well, given the need for direct and indirect protection against terror attacks.

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We believe that the threat is too great, and the uncertainties of future developments too extreme, to end the American and coalition presence in the field.

Instead, the United States should pursue the enduring security relationship foreseen in the Strategic Partnership Agreement, a relatively low-cost insurance policy to protect the tremendous investment the country has made, and which enables Americans and Afghans to cooperate in targeting their most dangerous enemies where they attempt to plan and organize. Both the Loya Jirga and the Afghan parliament have manifested Afghan public support for this partnership. The United States has made such commitments before in its history, when long-term challenges called for long-term strategies to contain them, and they have paid off.

The recent setback in Kunduz, and the subsequent struggle by the ANSF to regain control of the city, demonstrate the difficulty of providing security throughout the country—as well as the ability of the ANSF, with limited but vital international assistance, to respond. Without rushing to judgement, we believe this episode underscores the need not only for ANSF capability, but for effective, integrated political and

security leadership, coordination on the ground, and coordination between the field and Kabul authorities. We urge the Afghan government and the US authorities to quickly assess the shortcomings that contributed to Kunduz, and to expeditiously and seriously apply the lessons learned wherever necessary.

## **SECOND, CLARITY AND CONFIDENCE MATTER**

The United States and its allies are confronted today with multiple zones of regional strife, and with religious, societal, ethnic, and demographic fissures that ultimately threaten their interests and are of a complexity that puts them beyond their capability to resolve as an outsider, however well-meaning. That is one of the key lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq. The United States needs regional partners, and Islamic partners, whom it can support in containing that strife and, ultimately, in finding solutions within the Islamic world that go beyond the use of military force. That will involve helping such regional partners to strengthen and protect themselves. In Afghanistan, the United States has such a partner. It has the opportunity to help Afghans contain their own conflict, and deal with it in regional terms that promote stability and might eventually lead to peace. Doing so will also reinforce the credibility on which building partnerships, including those it is trying to develop elsewhere, depends.

Clarity about the US commitment, and a security role that extends beyond 2016, will provide confidence to the Afghans, steeling their own commitment and encouraging the political evolution and economic revival, which Afghanistan so urgently needs after years of uncertainty. The Taliban need to see plainly that their campaign will not prevail, and that the hatred for Taliban terror will ultimately defeat it, as some members have already concluded. It must become clear that its mocking mantra, “The Americans have the watches, but we have the time,” is obsolete. The Taliban must come to believe that it is the Afghan people who now have the watches, and the time. Others in the region need to understand that as well.

## **THIRD, ADDRESS REGIONAL COOPERATION, PAKISTAN, SAFE HAVENS, AND PEACE**

Getting to the ultimate objective of a peace settlement requires that Afghan security forces hold their own. It also requires the commitment to Afghan stability of Afghanistan’s neighbors, and of others with interests in the region. This is critical to the work of persuading the insurgents that they cannot re-establish the Islamic Emirate, and that the only way forward is through a political process and, eventually, peaceful reconciliation among Afghans. That work, to which

many of Afghanistan’s friends have contributed, is clouded by many uncertainties, not least of which is the difficult relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. As President Ghani identified early on, the space for regional actors to play a more active, constructive role is an important variable to explore. There may be opportunities for new efforts by China, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan to get the Taliban to the table, and to help stabilize other troubled relationships in the region. The implications of the death of Mullah Mohammed Omar, and of his demise being concealed for some years, remain to be seen, as the leadership struggle within the Taliban, and increasingly between the Taliban and Daesh, is still unfolding. President Ghani and his government are to be commended for their efforts to energize negotiations, and to engage the Pakistani government in a serious discussion about the threat of extremism to both Pakistan and Afghanistan, and what both can do about it. However the post-Omar situation evolves, there are already visible fissures in the Taliban. The Haqqanis and al-Qaeda have aligned with the new Taliban Leader Mullah Mansour, and Daesh is seeking adherents from among the developed network of extremists on both sides of the border. This new reality will impact both the Afghan and Pakistani governments and, together with the recent wave of attacks in Kabul, cannot help but raise suspicions that undercut the cooperation both countries need to advance their security.

No one can tell at this point whether there will be a Taliban interlocutor for peace, or when. But the prospects are reduced significantly as long as the Taliban and the Haqqani Network (HQN) have the ability to organize, plan, and launch operations from Pakistan against Afghan civilians, the Afghan government, and the international presence. A number of us have directly attempted to shape Pakistan’s own thinking about the threat it faces from terrorism, about the benefits of stability in Afghanistan in support of Pakistan’s own security, and on the imperative to move from agreement on that proposition to actual action on the ground. Pakistan appears to have made the rhetorical shift. During a February, 2015 visit to Kabul, Army Chief of Staff General Raheel Sharif declared “enemies of Afghanistan are enemies of Pakistan.” In May, Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif repeated in Kabul that “Afghanistan’s enemies will be treated as Pakistan’s enemies.” The test will be whether Pakistan follows through with concrete action.

Disabusing the Taliban leadership of the notion that “we have the time” requires the attenuation, if not the outright elimination, of Taliban and HQN safe havens in Pakistan. Pakistan has repeatedly committed to use its Zarb-i-Azb campaign against extremists in Waziristan, now more than a year old, to target all terrorists without discrimination. Reports indicate that the Haqqanis have relocated from North Waziristan to elsewhere in



Non Commissioned Officers of the Afghan National Army. *Photo credit: US Air Force/Wikimedia Commons.*

Pakistan, from where they are continuing their attacks. The operational head of the HQN, Sirajuddin Haqqani, has become the deputy of Mullah Mansour, and divisions among senior levels of the Taliban are playing out rather openly in Quetta. The time has come to insist that Pakistan disrupt the ability of the Taliban/HQN to organize attacks in Afghanistan, as it has repeatedly committed to do in the context of the Zarb-i-Azb operation, and to put actions to rhetoric about the threat both countries face from violent extremism. We further recommend the development of a multinational effort to engage Pakistan in support of this objective, backed by incentives, disincentives, and sharing of intelligence. Achieving such support will require US engagement, not only to make clear the costs and limits of allowing the insurgency to operate, but also to help explore ways in which Afghan and Pakistani fears could be addressed through engagement between the two countries.

#### FOURTH, IT'S THE ECONOMY

While maintaining the integrity of the ANSF effort to provide security is the sine qua non for Afghanistan to move forward, the need to generate economic activity is urgent, and almost as vital to success. Lack

of clarity about the way ahead for Afghanistan impedes economic activity. While the economy has not collapsed, uncertainty about the future of the relationship with the United States, coupled with the long and troubled political transition and concern about the future business environment, brought about a sharp downturn in economic activity, from which Afghanistan has not rebounded. It must be a high priority for all concerned to urgently take steps to jumpstart the economy. This will require a government staffed and functioning, the completion of new legislation already pending to bring Afghanistan's financial and extractions regulations up to international standards, and concrete steps to demonstrate the implementation of the government's "Realizing Self-Reliance" strategy. The Afghan government must take steps to improve the country's business climate, such as invigorating the private sector and entrepreneurship, making the commercial legal environment predictable, and attacking the corruption that impedes economic activity.

An extensive review of progress made, and of the Afghan government's program and responsibilities going forward, was at the core of the Tokyo Process meeting of Senior Officials in Kabul on September 5,





School girls in Farah Province, Afghanistan. Photo credit: US Air Force/Wikimedia Commons.

2015. The Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) took stock of the mutual commitments made by the government and the international donor community as they attempt to match progress with continued donor support. Afghan commitments and obligations were updated and reaffirmed. Major donors need to provide their own perspective on the way forward past 2016, with an Afghan and international development program that will endure throughout the “Transformation Decade” and beyond the end of 2016. Prior to the next Tokyo Process Ministerial in Brussels, it would be useful for the United States and other donors to provide clarity that a significant level of international assistance will remain available, as the government delivers on the performance indicators affirmed at the SOM, on its own “Realizing Self-Reliance” program, and on the commendable “New Development Partnership” agreed to during President Ghani’s visit to Washington in March, which incentivizes Afghan performance.

Regional trade is critical for the economic growth on which Afghanistan’s self-reliance depends. The United States should expand efforts to encourage and find funding for regional efforts to tackle energy, water, and transit trade issues. The Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline (TAPI), and the flow of energy from the Kyrgyzstan

and Tajikistan into Pakistan and India, are examples. China’s “One Belt, One Road” initiative offers the potential to substantially contribute to greater regional economic integration, and we encourage concrete action and cooperation by all concerned to begin realizing its promise.

## FIFTH, POLITICS NOT AS USUAL

The way ahead must also include strengthening the National Unity Government itself, in support of its commitment to better governance, electoral reform, women’s rights, and work against corruption. We are in no position to delve into the intricacies of Afghan governance, nor do we underestimate the difficulties of implementing the government’s ambitious goals. But demonstrable achievements breed confidence. There has been progress, and even small steps are important. Achievements should be accompanied by improved strategic communications in support of the National Unity Government’s goals. An important task for Afghans, with international support, will be to build consensus on the way ahead for political reform, elections, and the evolution of Afghanistan’s political system. A realistic timetable for the work of the Elections Reform Commission, and for parliamentary



elections and political process, needs to be established on its own merits, but also as a means of boosting confidence. President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah must stand together. We urge Afghanistan's political and religious leaders to support them in building the national unity which Afghans require and deserve. All of this would be difficult in a mature democracy under less stress, and we acknowledge the need for patience and forbearance as the political effort develops and, it is to be hoped, improves. This would be difficult under any circumstances; none of it is likely to be possible absent the heft and confidence provided by continued US engagement.

## SIXTH, A FRESH LOOK AT STRATEGY

As noted above, the situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan—and, indeed, the entire zone of crisis—is rapidly changing. Certain assumptions on which earlier decisions were made no longer pertain, and new elements are in play. The threat from violent extremism and regional conflict requires an overarching response; the military effort must be an instrument, but it alone is not sufficient to the task. Al-Qaeda, its offshoots, and Daesh are symptoms of the fundamentally diseased ideology that inspires them. Experience teaches that while it might be contained, an ideology cannot be defeated militarily. That defeat can ultimately come only from within the Islamic world. However, it will also require a sustained, multilateral, and multifaceted effort, which the challenge of defeating that ideology demands and which the United States can uniquely help to organize and marshal. There is much good work

under way in that regard, but we fear that the nature of the challenge and the effort required to deal with it are not well understood by the public, whether in the United States, Europe, Asia, Africa, or the Middle East.

It is beyond the scope of this paper and its purpose to flesh out here how this might be better addressed, but there is need for a stronger sense of purpose and resilience in the face of a threat that is embodied in a spectrum of dangers, which range from the murderous actions of a few in a magazine office or a train, to the destruction of a region, massive refugee flows, mass casualties, and the possible engagement of weapons of mass destruction.

However it manifests itself, this is an assault on a way of life and on the values of the UN charter, as was September 11 itself. We believe that in a time of such stress, the United States needs a much stronger bipartisan consensus than currently exists, both to respond to the threat, and to prepare for as seamless a transition in security affairs as possible between the Obama administration and its successor. Work on preparing strategy and policy options will occupy the think tank/policy community going forward. We would hope that a bipartisan effort could be created, as well, to develop agreement on goals and strategy. A refreshed look at strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan must be part of this larger context, with a continuing view to achieving the end stage described by President Ghani here in Washington: that Afghanistan be a normal country, contributing to the stability of its region, and thus to America's own security and interests.

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