



The Need for a Political and Economic Transition Strategy in Afghanistan

Report from July 2011 Trip to Kabul, Afghanistan

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Executive summary

President Barack Obama announced the start of a security transition in Afghanistan earlier this summer that will give lead responsibility to the Afghan government by 2014. But the United States still lacks a fully integrated plan for the political and economic transition to complement the security transition. U.S. efforts have been almost exclusively focused on building the size and capacity of the Afghanistan National Security Forces, or ANSF, weakening the insurgency through military strikes, and maintaining recent security gains achieved in parts of the south during the 2010-2011 surge of U.S. forces and the International Security Assistance Forces, or ISAF.

This report is based on four days of meetings in Kabul, Afghanistan from July 27-30, 2011, with top Afghan, U.S., and international officials. Among the Afghan leaders, the team met with key figures in the current government, opposition figures, leaders in the Afghan upper and lower houses of parliament, and members of civil society and the private sector.

We found that the Afghan state is in crisis, with a broad range of Afghans warning that their country's fragile democratic institutions are crumbling. A number of obstacles to a successful political and economic transition exist, including unchecked executive power, serious discord among those political forces that accept the Afghan constitution, and many unanswered questions about the path forward to achieve a sustainable political settlement with the Taliban. If the current trajectory continues, the ANSF may have no state left to defend.

Based on our findings, we recommend that U.S. policymakers take the following steps:

Reset the relationship with President Hamid Karzai while still using leverage to advance reforms. U.S. officials should work to reset the relationship with President Karzai in a way that creates incentives for a broad range of actors both in and out of the Afghan government to build a more sustainable political system.

Policymakers should attempt to utilize U.S. and international leverage more effectively to encourage these political and economic reforms.

Clarify the message. The Obama administration should assign one main interlocutor, presumably Ambassador Ryan Crocker, to manage its relationship with President Karzai, provide this person with high-level support from President Obama and his entire team, and clarify its short-, medium-, and long-term objectives to President Karzai and the region.

Support and invest in democratic institutions and forces. The United States should increase its support for institutions, the media, and broader civil society to strengthen checks and balances in the system in order to increase accountability and inclusion of more Afghans.

Support a more inclusive peace process. A successful reconciliation process will need to have high-level U.S. engagement, and better coordination between political reconciliation and a military strategy. Moreover, it requires transparency and broad participation from a wider range of actors.

Shift from a development strategy to a sustainable economic strategy.

The process of helping Afghanistan create the building blocks for a sustainable economy has not yet begun in earnest. This would include prioritizing a small number of key initiatives that focus on economic growth, leveraging the private sector, and focusing support on regional integration.

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