



The Need for a Political and Economic Transition Strategy in Afghanistan

Report from July 2011 Trip to Kabul, Afghanistan

John Podesta, Brian Katulis, and Caroline Wadhams August 2011



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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.

Remaining obstacles to a successful transition

The U.S.-Karzai relationship

Improving relations with President Hamid Karzai while supporting a political opening in Afghanistan is a central challenge for U.S. policymakers. Many Afghans outside of the government, including Afghan business leaders and members of civil society, argue that the United States has provided President Karzai with unconditional support, making us appear complicit with behavior by Karzai that many Afghans view as antidemocratic. Yet many also lament the dramatic deterioration in U.S.-Afghan relations since 2002. The challenge for U.S. policymakers, therefore, is to perform a delicate balancing act between resetting the relationship with President Karzai while providing support to democratic forces and institutions in Afghanistan.

Most Afghans we met argue that a reset in the relationship between President Karzai and U.S. leaders is required, a belief that U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Ryan Crocker appears to embrace in his recent public statements praising President Karzai's leadership. At the same time, cozying up to President Karzai creates other risks—potentially incentivizing President Karzai to stay in office past 2014, weakening and demoralizing the political opposition in Afghanistan, and decreasing U.S. leverage if support is perceived as conditions-free.

Given the near absence of checks and balances in the system and the weakness of the opposition, the United States may be one of the only actors that can serve as a check on presidential power, insert some measure of accountability, and push for reforms to bring more Afghans—both insurgents and unarmed opposition—into the political fold. Therefore U.S. policymakers must thread the needle of improving the relationship with President Karzai while maintaining support for democratic institutions and an opening of the political space to make the system more sustainable.

Mixed signals from the United States continue to confuse Karzai. President Karzai and Afghan citizens remain uncertain of U.S. objectives in Afghanistan, due to mixed messages from U.S. policymakers, particularly in Congress but also in the Obama administration. Many key Afghan leaders believe that the United States is in Afghanistan for reasons other than defeating Al Qaeda. Conspiracy theories abound even at the most senior level of the Afghan government that the United States wants to use Afghanistan indefinitely as a base to project power in Asia and the Middle East as part of a new “Great Game.”

This misperception of U.S. objectives undermines trust and distorts the bilateral relationship, causing President Karzai and other top Afghan officials to believe that the United States wants to stay in Afghanistan indefinitely and that we need a strategic partnership more than the Afghans do. This view decreases U.S. leverage and motivates some Afghan officials to play a dangerous game in which they do not take the United States’s limits seriously and especially Congress’s growing impatience with the Afghan government’s behavior and the mission in Afghanistan.

If the Afghan government continues to fail to address corruption and enhance governance and accountability, U.S. policymakers may be unable to justify to the American people continued engagement and support for the Afghan government, especially in a tight budget environment. Congress could demand a faster reduction in troop levels and funding.

The new team in place, with the recent arrival of General John Allen and U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker, offers an opportunity to clarify this message to the palace, to reset the relationship with President Karzai, and to seek political reforms. Under their impressive leadership, they are already showing progress in a reset with the president and in civil-military coordination. Their challenge will be to clarify U.S. objectives to Afghans and regional players and to negate conspiracy theories while transitioning to Afghan lead.

Unchecked executive power and underdeveloped institutions

The Afghan executive branch’s dominant role has hampered the development of Afghan institutions, political opposition, and civil society. Afghans outside of government feel marginalized from decision-making in the presidential palace, with no points of access to influence the country’s direction or hold Karzai accountable.

Afghans see the executive branch as systematically weakening the nascent state structures and bypassing the Afghan Constitution through a number of recent actions, including:

- The creation of the Special Tribunal, which President Karzai established to adjudicate complaints in the 2010 parliamentary elections despite having no legal mandate under the constitution. This tribunal determined that 62 members of the parliament should be removed due to unspecified fraud, creating a crisis in the parliament, which resisted the move. President Karzai recently dissolved the tribunal due to widespread resistance from the international community, the Independent Election Commission, and most members of the lower house, but the dispute over the election results remains unresolved.
- President Karzai's disregard for the term limits of Supreme Court justices.
- The intimidation of the Independent Election Commission, which organizes Afghanistan's elections and holds constitutional responsibility for certifying the final electoral results.
- President Karzai's decision to convene a *loya jirga* in the fall to consult on the Strategic Partnership Agreement, an agreement currently being negotiated between the United States and Afghanistan on the long-term bilateral relationship (with fears expressed that Karzai will change the constitution to stay in office beyond 2014).
- The marginalization of the Major Crimes Task Force, a unit established within Afghanistan to undertake high-level investigations of corruption and crime.

The current government structure makes it almost impossible for alternative centers of power to emerge. Furthermore, several factors make it difficult for Afghans to organize around an agenda broader than the country's ethnic divisions, including a weak civil society and an electoral system—the single nontransferrable vote mechanism—that disincentivizes political party formation.

Institutions that could potentially serve as a check on presidential power at the national, provincial, and local levels, are too weak or are co-opted by Karzai and self-interested powerbrokers, some of whom have links to criminal and drug trafficking networks. The upper house of parliament is largely allied with the palace, which appoints one-third of its members. Afghans see the lower house as a body of power-brokers and individuals advancing the interests of their own businesses or specific

ethnic groups, with only a handful of reformers. Many Afghans see the judiciary as a body with little independence from the executive branch.

At the local level, President Karzai appoints the governors, district governors, and police chiefs. Provincial councils, which are elected, have an ambiguous set of responsibilities and no real control over budgets, and district council and village council elections have not yet occurred.

The provincial council elections are scheduled for 2013, with presidential and parliamentary elections held in 2014 and 2015 respectively. But without significant electoral reform, it is difficult to see how these elections will avoid the mistakes of the 2009 presidential election and the 2010 parliamentary elections, in which widespread fraud occurred and millions of voters were disenfranchised undermining the legitimacy of both elections.

Continued complaints of unchecked executive power and impunity within the current system fuel opposition to the government and the international community. Afghans and international officials argue that there is a crisis in the Afghan state and that the state risks imploding due to the warring between institutions, their ongoing weakness and manipulation by Afghan leadership, and a growing legitimacy deficit. Several Afghans even asked what the ANSF would defend if no functioning state remains.

Given the long list of attempts by the executive branch to strengthen its role at the expense of other institutions, many in the political opposition express the belief that President Karzai wants to become a monarch-type figure, based on Pashtun dominance. Some see a tightening clique of presidential advisers, further fueling conspiracy theories and anti-American opinions around the president about U.S. objectives.

Both international officials and Afghans speak of the criminal patronage networks in Afghanistan and the overlapping of criminal, government, and insurgent actors. Private sector leaders express worries that political cronies and criminal networks might take away legitimate business property. ISAF and U.S. military officials are now attempting to clean up their contracting procedures to reduce their role in corruption, but impunity for corruption remains a deep concern among the Afghan people. Afghans have little ability to resolve basic disputes over pasture and water access, or to redress wrongs. A lack of accountability plagues the Afghan system at the national and local levels, driving insurgent recruitment, disillusionment with the Afghan state, and opposition to the international community's presence.

Some bright spots exist within Afghanistan's political system

While many Afghans expressed deep gloom about their country's future, we also saw some bright spots. Civil society, while weak, is growing and active with a deep desire to strengthen democratic institutions within their country. Many pleaded with us not to abandon the institutions that have been created despite their weaknesses, seeing these as essential for Afghanistan's long-term stability. Afghanistan has a thriving media, where Afghans debate their challenges freely. More district governors are now going through an appointments process, which vets individuals, a step the international community has advocated for some time. The fabric for helping Afghanistan construct a viable and self-sustaining political system exists—through local institutions like the National Solidarity Program's community councils—but requires substantial support and investment.

The crisis surrounding the 2010 parliamentary elections, marred by a nearly year-long series of legal and political disputes over the results, remains unresolved. But President Karzai's statements in early August to support the authority of the Independent Election Commission in the dispute may be a step in the right direction. And it may be the result, not just of international pressure, but of Afghan individuals and institutions taking a united approach in pushing back on President Karzai. For example, the Independent Electoral Commission, despite aggressive intimidation including threat of prosecution, held its ground against the tribunal's decision to oust 62 parliamentarians. And, the parliament, while flawed, served as a cohesive bloc to prevent their removal. Moreover, President Karzai's declaration that he will not seek an extra-constitutional third term in 2014 creates a potential opening for a successful transfer to another elected leader in accordance with the law.

Threats to peace, security, and economic development

Internal conflicts and distrust threaten forward momentum on reconciliation.

Karzai's initial steps to engage the Taliban and start a reconciliation process, including the High Peace Council, a body President Karzai established in 2010 to hold talks with the Taliban, lack the support and confidence of a range of actors, especially the political opposition. Many Afghans perceive the process as exclusive and lacking transparency, aimed at achieving a deal between insurgents and the government without providing assurances to other Afghan communities.

If reconciliation is aimed at bringing more power centers within the framework of the Afghan constitution, the Afghan government will need to ensure that it maintains the support of actors that have already accepted the terms of the Afghan constitution. Afghanistan's highly fragmented society has created enormous distrust among different Afghan ethnic groups, tribes, and communities, making an inclusive and transparent reconciliation process necessary if the political transition in Afghanistan is going to succeed.

Moreover, some expressed fears that ISAF's "capture and kill" tactics may be fragmenting the insurgency, leaving few commanders with whom to negotiate and potentially undermining their ability to enforce a peace. Reintegration efforts—the attempts to bring lower-ranking Taliban members back into their communities under the framework of the Afghan government—appear to be moving slowly, but ISAF personnel argue that it has finally put the essential infrastructure in place to provide the social and economic support necessary to motivate these individuals to abandon the Taliban.

Coordination of reintegration efforts with other initiatives to implement development programs and boost provincial, district, and local government institutions remain unclear. Divisions between the nonarmed factions (even within the palace), combined with the growing disarray and potential fragmentation among insurgents, means that much work remains to be done in creating a viable roadmap for an inclusive peace process.

Afghans continue to raise questions about the long-term effectiveness of ISAF military strategy. Numerous Afghan actors express skepticism regarding ISAF's claims of progress and see a deterioration of security, even in Kandahar. The targeted assassinations of Afghan officials this summer along with continued high levels of civilian casualties nationwide, mostly caused by the Taliban insurgency, are key factors in shaping perceptions about insecurity. Moreover, many describe the violence in Kandahar not as a Taliban vs. NATO/Afghan government dynamic, but as warfare among different tribes, rivals, communities, and drug networks fighting for power and money.

ISAF military leaders cite a need to keep the pressure on the enemy even as U.S. and other ISAF troops draw down over the next few years. Military officials see dramatic improvements in security in specific locations but acknowledge

the lack of progress on governance and the state's lack of legitimacy at the local level. The military seeks to continue its current operations while consolidating gains in the south and accelerating the process of getting the ANSF on the field. The plans for dealing with insecurity in the eastern part of Afghanistan remain unclear, and ISAF and the ANSF will have serious challenges maintaining the security gains achieved in southern Afghanistan while dealing with instability in other parts of the country.

While NATO-ISAF officials praise the Afghan Local Police, or ALP, initiative, an effort to enhance security to people living in districts not controlled by the ANSF by creating local defense forces, many Afghans worry that its creation weakens nonarmed individuals and their voices within societies and contributes to further predatory attacks by armed actors. Night raids conducted jointly by ISAF and Afghan forces nearly 12 to 15 times each night serve as a major irritant in the U.S.-Afghan relationship; many Afghans believe the raids feed opposition to the international presence. The continued ISAF lead over incarceration is another ongoing source of tension in the U.S.-Afghan relationship, as the Afghan government seeks more control over detentions, night raids, and house searches.

The transition to Afghan-led responsibility for security is currently planned to take place in six “tranches” between now and the end of 2013. The relationship between the ANSF and the weak Afghan government institutions at all levels remains unclear. In addition, an ongoing challenge for ISAF strategy will be calibrating military operations to ensure that they facilitate power-sharing, reconciliation, and reintegration. The U.S. military plans to have transitioned into a different force posture centered on advising and enabling the ANSF, along with a robust intelligence capacity. It hopes to have continued participation and support from NATO allies in ISAF.

Afghans and international officials expressed concerns about the lack of a strategic plan for the long-term size and cost of the ANSF, currently planned to grow to 379,000 by October 2012. The costs to the United States for this effort will amount to nearly \$13 billion proposed for next year in U.S. spending. Some in the international community worry that Afghanistan lacks the political and economic support to sustain the size and costs of the ANSF; some Afghan officials are concerned about the lack of a clear strategic plan that integrates the efforts to build the ANSF with broader attempts to strengthen other Afghan institutions and help Afghanistan create a self-sustaining political economy.

Afghans united in concerns about important neighboring countries. One point of consensus among many in the Karzai government and the opposition is the worry about the role Pakistan plays in Afghanistan. Many criticize the United States for its continued assistance to Pakistan's security institutions, which they see as a source of instability and supporter of terrorist networks in Afghanistan. Some pragmatically acknowledge that Pakistan will have to play a key role if reconciliation and power-sharing with the Taliban is to move forward, but few have practical ideas about how best to shape the strategic calculus of Pakistani leaders.

In addition, many Afghans and international officials believe that Iran is playing an increasingly unproductive role in Afghanistan and providing support to the insurgency. According to many observers, both Iran and Pakistan are attempting to buy off parliamentarians and discourage them from supporting the proposed strategic partnership agreement with the United States.

Efforts to help Afghanistan create building blocks for a sustainable economy have not begun. The process of weaning the Afghan political economy off foreign aid and military spending and helping Afghanistan create the building blocks for a sustainable economy has not yet begun in earnest. In addition to the security challenges, part of the problem is the continued lack of coordination within the international community and the current incentive structures for Beltway consultants and military contractors to maintain the status quo. Another problem is the lack of a strong and politically empowered point of contact within the Afghan government to take the lead on developing an economic strategy. The current policy creates incentives for the Afghan government to continue conducting business the way it has for much of the past decade.

Despite these challenges, there are some promising efforts such as the National Solidarity Program, or NSP, a program established in 2003 by the Afghan Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development to help thousands of Afghan communities identify, plan, manage, and monitor their own community development projects. The NSP continues to thrive, empowering local communities through elected community development councils to determine development priorities within their communities. The government itself has some very competent leaders who are attempting to strengthen their agencies to improve government services and to strengthen Afghanistan's economy and development, such as the Ministers of Mines and Finance.

Recommendations to U.S. policymakers for crafting a political and economic transition strategy

Reset the relationship with 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 system with institutional checks and balances. U.S. policymakers should attempt to utilize U.S. and international leverage more effectively to encourage reforms such as withdrawing aid for discrete purposes and providing additional assistance as an incentive for specific reforms, for example Karzai strengthening the Major Crimes Task Force and/or maintaining the independence of the Independent Electoral Commission. There are some encouraging signs that this reset is already underway, but given the complicated history of managing relations with Karzai, it will require an ongoing diplomatic effort.

Clarify the message. While the Obama administration cannot force members of Congress or the media to stay on message, it can exercise more discipline in speaking with one voice. It 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.

This main U.S. interlocutor should be clear about our central goal: to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a base for global terrorists and a vortex for regional proxy violence. We should also communicate clearly that the United States has no interest in using Afghanistan as part of a broader geopolitical strategy to project power into the region. More broadly, we should make clear that the United States does not want to repeat the so-called Great Game of the previous centuries when outside powers tried to use Afghanistan for their own purposes.

U.S. policymakers also need to enlist the Afghan government's help in better explaining U.S. objectives and operations to the Afghan public. President Karzia's reluctance to give equal condemnation to Taliban-inflicted civilian casualties compared to those caused by ISAF (even when the vast majority of civilian deaths in Afghanistan

are caused by insurgent operations) contributes to public confusion over the nature of the fighting and U.S. and NATO activities. The Taliban have shown considerable sensitivity to efforts to hold them publicly accountable for violating their own minimal standards for civilian protection. Both the U.S. and Afghan governments should work to coordinate their message on this issue in the future.

Support and invest in democratic institutions. 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 in the political system. This would entail:

- Utilizing U.S. leverage to support the parliament and the Independent Electoral Commission
- Continuing to demand a resolution of the Special Tribunal crisis that does not sacrifice Afghanistan's institutions
- Encouraging President Karzai to replace the three Supreme Court justices that have stayed beyond their term
- Encouraging greater clarification of Provincial Council responsibilities
- Consolidating the duplicative shuras that exist at the local level to create one district council until elections occur
- Pursuing electoral reform while supporting political parties to ensure more credible and transparent elections in the future
- Continuing to invest in capacity-building efforts to strengthen Afghan civil society in areas such as electoral reform advocacy and greater transparency and accountability in government.

While budget cuts are inevitable, funding for governance and Afghanistan's economy should be seen as essential elements of transition, and just as important as training ANSF. The current transition effort lacks a clear plan for the political and economic building blocks necessary for Afghanistan to stand on its own, and supporting the creation of democratic institutions is at the core of this challenge.

Support a more inclusive peace process. The international community has consistently stated that a peace process in Afghanistan must be Afghan-led. The process it is supporting now, however, could potentially lead to internal strife and perhaps even civil war, as Afghan factions perceive it with deep suspicion. Moreover, in their desire to have an Afghan-led process, U.S. policymakers should recognize how little the Afghan government can deliver with the United States holding the keys to what the insurgents care about—mainly the ability to control night raids and detentions and the size and presence of international forces and ANSF.

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 the participation of a wider range of actors.

Utilize leverage more effectively to influence Afghan leaders' calculus. Some development experts worry that the international community is mishandling its leverage in its current handling of the corruption case involving Kabul Bank, Afghanistan's largest private bank that suffered hundreds of millions of dollars of losses in bad and fictitious loans. For example, linking the resolution of Kabul Bank crisis to the IMF program and investment funding in the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund could end up undermining some of the more effective and transparent programs dedicated to improving ordinary Afghans' quality of life such as the National Solidarity Program, which could run out of funding this fall. The NSP is an important program that has had a positive impact the Afghan population, and the threat of withholding funding for it has not achieved effective results from Karzai. Instead, the United States and its international partners should look at other more targeted areas to withhold support if reforms are not implemented.

Shift from a development strategy to a sustainable economic strategy.

Elements of this include:

- **Prioritize a small number of key initiatives that focus on economic growth.**

The United States must focus its declining aid dollars on a small number of key initiatives to focus U.S. economic efforts. Currently, the United States is flooding money and attention into multiple projects that have had little impact on transitioning the economy out of an aid-dependent one, and putting Afghanistan on a long-term economic growth path over the long-term.

Some national programs are showing results, for example the National Solidarity Program and the Basic Program of Health Services, an Afghan Ministry of Health program that provides health services through primary care facilities throughout the country. But there is a need for real prioritization of those programs that are showing results and those that are not or cannot be sustained by the Afghan government. One option is to facilitate the establishment of a commission of Afghan leaders to articulate and implement an economic growth strategy. While working with an empowered U.S. team, this commission might provide needed Afghan ownership and flexibility.

- **Leverage the private sector.** Utilizing the expertise, advice, and investment of the private sector will be essential to creating an economic strategy and to pursuing economic growth. The administration should support a greater role for organizations like the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, or OPIC, that can coordinate and support private-sector investments, rather than relying on U.S. taxpayer-funded aid projects.

The Pentagon's Task Force for Business and Stability Operations has attempted this work in the past but its tendency to work without coordinating with other U.S. government agencies has limited its impact. One option would be to create a task force of business leaders to advise on the Afghan economy; such a task force could report on a policy framework and stay engaged during implementation.

- **Focus support on regional integration.** Afghanistan's economic development plans should be embedded within a regional economic integration plan. This concept—laying out a set of linkages and synergies for trade, transportation, energy, water, and other economic activities—creates a set of win-win economic arrangements that could have significant economic impact on jobs and revenue creation, while creating incentives for cross-border collaboration. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Marc Grossman's office has rightly focused on this issue and has the potential to coordinate U.S. government efforts going forward.

U.S. diplomatic efforts should continue to support Afghanistan's economic integration within the region, by using its diplomatic influence to advance and support initiatives to connect Afghanistan into the trade, energy, and transport networks of its neighboring countries. These steps may be augmented with support for risk insurance, identifying and financing investment opportunities, enterprise funding for Afghan businesses, and continued support for transportation infrastructure and human capital development within Afghanistan.

Conclusion

A disconnect exists between the current military strategy and simultaneous efforts to seek peace with elements of the insurgency and to help Afghans construct a sustainable political system. In addition, Afghanistan's economy remains heavily dependent on development assistance and foreign military spending.

The United States is currently working with its Afghan and ISAF partners to implement a transition plan that puts the Afghan government in the lead role for security by 2014. A strong emphasis of this transition effort is focused on building the ANSF—the largest single line item in next year's Defense Department budget is training, equipping, and supporting the ANSF. This security assistance is an essential building block to help Afghanistan move beyond more than three decades of war. But this security assistance is insufficient without an accompanying political and economic strategy that addresses major problems in today's Afghanistan.

The current transition strategy is similar to a three-legged stool with two weak legs—the political institutional development and economic transition efforts—with much of the resources and investment being made in the one strong leg, the security assistance. In order to have a successful transition in Afghanistan, the United States and its international partners need to dedicate more attention on supporting these political and economic legs, including establishing an inclusive reconciliation process, building Afghan political institutions, and helping Afghanistan create the foundations for a sustainable economy.

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