



# Outlining a Diplomatic Strategy for Afghanistan's Political Transition

## U.S. Policy Requires a More Coordinated Diplomatic and Political Approach to Match the Security Transition Efforts

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### Introduction

Since 2009 the Obama administration has renewed efforts to stabilize Afghanistan and dealt major blows to Al Qaeda and its affiliates around the world. As the United States and other international partners realign their commitments in Afghanistan in the coming years to meet broader global priorities, responsibility for securing the country's future will shift to Afghan leaders. The year 2014 will be critical for this transition as that is the year that Afghan forces are set to assume full control of their nation's security and the scheduled presidential election will produce the first Afghan government since 2001 not led by President Hamid Karzai.

To date most of the additional resources and attention dedicated to Afghanistan have focused on shoring up basic security—increasing the U.S. and International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, troop presence with an eye toward strengthening the Afghan National Security Forces. This effort has produced marked increases in the number of Afghan police and soldiers, who by this fall will hold responsibility for areas comprising nearly three-quarters of the country's population. This security strategy still faces risks as demonstrated by the worrying spike in attacks this year by members of the Afghan national security forces on their international mentors and continued insurgent attacks on Afghan civilians and government officials.

The diplomatic and political components of the strategy, meanwhile, have lagged behind the military efforts. The success of the 2014 transition ultimately rests on the ability of Afghan leaders to organize a diplomatic and political process that keeps the country unified. This includes managing a transparent electoral process that can result in a broadly acceptable outcome among Afghan political coalitions. Establishing stability in Afghanistan without the indefinite commitment of significant levels of international forces requires a political system in which opposing groups see participation in the

political process as a viable alternative to armed conflict. Currently, no Afghan political movement—to include the government—has been able to unify the country and garner significant broad-based legitimacy. A more coherent political transition strategy is needed—one that better coordinates the plans being made for an electoral transfer of power with the efforts to reform and broaden participation in Afghanistan’s political system, and syncs military efforts to these goals.<sup>1</sup>

The United States and its international partners have developed initial frameworks for providing long-term security and economic support to Afghanistan from 2014 to 2024, in what is termed a “transformational decade.” In May the United States and Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement that set a comprehensive framework for bilateral relation and the NATO Summit in Chicago reaffirmed broad international support for the security transition process. Last month the government of Afghanistan and the international community agreed on a framework in Tokyo—the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework—that provides a foundation for international assistance through the next decade by establishing a set of goals and commitments for the Afghan government and its donor sponsors. These are all essential building blocks for a successful transition and the long-term stability of Afghanistan.

But less than two years before pivotal elections, more tangible action is needed to translate these commitments into political action. Thus far, serious planning on the part of the international community for the upcoming presidential elections remains in nascent stages. Diplomatic outreach to Taliban elements and other movements currently operating outside of the Afghan political and constitutional framework have not yet produced major strategic breakthroughs. Regional diplomatic efforts to develop a more unified plan to support Afghanistan’s transition witnessed at the 2011 November conference in Istanbul have not resulted in an implementation plan for the many commitments made there. All of these efforts—the reforms to formal political institutions and processes, the multiple efforts to engage elements of the Taliban, and the attempts to garner constructive support for Afghanistan’s transition from its neighbors, particularly Pakistan—need to be better coordinated and more effectively synchronized.

The top priority for the international community and the government of Afghanistan should be to develop an inclusive political process resulting in improvements in Afghanistan’s political processes prior to the 2014 presidential election and continuing throughout the transformational decade to follow. The effectiveness of this effort will go a long way to determining whether the results of the 2014 presidential election will be broadly acceptable to a wide range of Afghan political actors, and whether the progress of the last decade can sustain itself in the absence of international forces.

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## Important building blocks: the Strategic Partnership Agreement, NATO's Chicago summit and the Tokyo conference

While much has been done so far in 2012 to lay the foundation for success in 2014, the international community and the government of Afghanistan will still face serious challenges over the next two years as Afghanistan transitions to greater self-reliance. The U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement provides a critical foundation for U.S. engagement in Afghanistan beyond 2014 by clarifying the two countries' mutual goals. The Strategic Partnership Agreement outlines commitments across the broad range of U.S.-Afghan engagement, most notably on security, in addition to addressing issues of social and economic development, governance, and democracy. Many of these commitments were echoed by the NATO alliance as a whole during its summit held this past May in Chicago.

Following up on the Chicago Summit, world leaders gathered on July 8 in Tokyo to make financial pledges to support Afghanistan's transition to economic and political self-reliance. International donors responded to Afghanistan's need for financial assistance by pledging \$16 billion to the country through 2015. Throughout the term of the pledge, up to 20 percent of the assistance could be provided through programs that require the government of Afghanistan to meet certain benchmarks to reduce corruption and increase transparency. The pledge was accompanied by the adoption of the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, which requires the monitoring of the Afghan government's performance in five major areas.

1. Representational democracy and equitable elections
2. Governance, rule of law, and human rights
3. Integrity of public finance and commercial banking
4. Government revenues, budget execution, and subnational governance
5. Inclusive and sustained growth and development

Progress in these five areas will be monitored through the existing Joint Coordination and Monitoring Body, a joint Afghan-U.N. coordination body originally established to monitor implementation of Afghanistan's National Development Strategy.

Like the Strategic Partnership Agreement, the Tokyo framework provides an important foundation for continued international assistance throughout Afghanistan's transition to self-reliance. The international community deserves recognition for establishing long-called-for conditions on assistance and discrete benchmarks and indicators by which to monitor Afghanistan's progress toward meeting its commitments. The challenge now lies in implementing these pledges and building them into a larger political strategy. Weaknesses in Afghanistan's political system have hampered reconciliation efforts and pose a serious threat to long-term stability as the country prepares for the withdrawal of international forces.

A new series of commitments is not in itself cause for optimism. The reality is that we have been here too many times before. Past opportunities created by diplomatic achievements have too often been met by a lack of follow-up.<sup>2</sup> While the 2001 Bonn Agreement laid the foundation for the Afghan state, Afghan and international commitments made as a result of major conferences since have often served only as window dressing and not resulted in sustainable progress.

Key priorities have been reiterated time and time again by the international community and the government of Afghanistan, like the Afghanistan Compact agreed to in London in 2006,<sup>3</sup> the commitments of the Afghan government to strengthen the formal justice sector made in Rome in 2007,<sup>4</sup> the commitments made at the second London conference in 2010 to improve the quality of Afghan governance and strengthen Afghan democracy,<sup>5</sup> the second Bonn conference in 2011, and the most recent conferences in Chicago and Tokyo. Bold commitments made at these various conferences have not, however, been pursued aggressively enough by Afghan actors in Kabul or by their international sponsors.

In advance of the Tokyo conference, President Karzai delivered a speech reaffirming his commitment to combat corruption and government waste to a joint session of Afghanistan's National Assembly. The speech aimed to signal a new commitment to fighting the corruption that wasted billions of dollars from donors since 2001.<sup>6</sup> Karzai's track record on following through with such pledges remains poor, however. Further, while the Karzai administration has consistently pledged to reduce corruption it has too often pointed to the international community as the cause of corruption rather than taking genuine responsibility for the graft that runs rampant throughout the Afghan government. Such denial is similar to Karzai's longstanding assertion that international interference and not deficiencies in the electoral system or the willingness of various Afghan institutions to meddle in electoral affairs, has been the true cause of Afghanistan's flawed elections.<sup>7</sup>

To realize a successful transition in 2014 and continued progress in the period beyond, the trend of bold promises followed by collective inaction must end. The window of opportunity is closing as the ability of the international community to exercise influence in Afghanistan wanes. The United States and other allies must work with the Afghan government to meet its commitments to strengthen the democratic foundations upon which its institutions of governance rest. A lack of focus on these priorities puts at risk the consolidation of the work of the past decade.

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## Toward a successful 2014 transition

While progress has been made in setting the foundation for success in 2014 through strong language in both the Strategic Partnership Agreement and the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, more concrete planning is needed to realize the commitments made by the government of Afghanistan across all sectors—particularly on elec-

tions planning and democratic strengthening. In areas such as economic development, education, and governance, the National Priority Programs outlined in Afghanistan's National Development Strategy provide avenues to pursue the government's commitments. On elections and democratic strengthening, however, no such platforms exist for Afghanistan and the international community to pursue the commitments made in Chicago and Tokyo. Just like the Afghan economy and the country's institutions of governance, Afghanistan's democracy requires maintenance. It should be a top priority for the international community and the government of Afghanistan to develop a process that focuses on improving the likelihood of broadly acceptable elections in 2014 and long-term planning for Afghanistan's political transition.

Political reform and broader democratic strengthening are critical to ongoing reconciliation efforts led by the Afghan government. Those who see Afghanistan's current political system as ineffectual or illegitimate must be convinced that the political process is a reasonable alternative to pursuing power and influence through armed conflict. Some elements of the Taliban may never enter a process of reconciliation or reintegration, but helping the Afghan political actors currently operating within the constitutional framework increase the legitimacy and credibility of Afghan political institutions could serve to channel some of the violent dissent into nonviolent political action.

Leaders in the Afghan government must come to recognize the inherent link between fixing its political system and the successful reconciliation and reintegration of antigovernment elements. A credible election and a successful transition of power in 2014 will send a strong signal to the major political actors and those who currently reject politics, that democracy is the legitimate path to power in Afghanistan.

To confront this reality, the government of Afghanistan should adopt political reform as a national priority and recognize the important role it can play in achieving headway on long stalled reconciliation talks. A genuine and effective effort on behalf of the Afghan government to meet commitments made in Chicago and Tokyo to conduct better elections, strengthen democratic institutions, and improve the equity of its political system could complement the work of the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Program and prove to be an asset to the ongoing work of Afghanistan's High Peace Council. A more effective approach by the Afghan government on electoral and democratic reform could also serve as an effective third pillar alongside reconciliation and reintegration effort and complement efforts to unite Afghanistan's political factions in a democratic Afghanistan.

Both the U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement and the Tokyo framework for international donors contain strong language in support of strengthening Afghan democracy and the administration of transparent elections. In the first development area articulated under the Tokyo framework—representational democracy and equitable elections—the Afghan government has committed to holding inclusive and transparent elections in 2014 and 2015. The framework calls upon the government of Afghanistan

to develop an electoral calendar through 2015 by no later than early 2013, and to ensure that a robust electoral architecture is developed in an inclusive manner before elections in 2014 and 2015. Following through on these commitments will be essential for the Afghan government if it is to sustain itself and have legitimacy. Afghanistan cannot afford the consequences of another flawed election, and the United States and international policymakers must seize upon the opportunity to engage the Afghan government on these issues to support a reform process prior to the 2014 election.

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## Recommendations and next steps

To assist Afghanistan to meet its commitments made in Chicago and Tokyo and to increase the likelihood that election outcomes in 2014 and 2015 will be broadly acceptable to the Afghan people and Afghanistan's various political coalitions, the U.S. government should consider the following actions.

- **Appoint a new point person representing the United States in Kabul to lead U.S. policy efforts on the political transition in Afghanistan.** The United States should assign an ambassador-rank focal point to Kabul to concentrate solely on the 2014 political transition. The person filling this position would work with the government of Afghanistan to support an inclusive process to reform Afghanistan's electoral process prior to the next elections and develop a comprehensive long-term implementation plan for democratic strengthening. The plan developed should include two tracks: (1) short-term planning for a transparent and inclusive electoral reform process prior to the next round of elections; and (2) planning for longer-term democratic reform that can help Afghanistan meet its commitment as articulated in the Strategic Partnership Agreement to increase the responsiveness and transparency of the Afghan executive, legislative, and judicial branches.<sup>8</sup> This new point person should remain in Kabul until the end of 2014 through both the presidential election and the successful transfer of power to a new Afghan government. The regular rotations of U.S. diplomatic personnel combined with the replacement of U.S. Ambassador Ryan Crocker with newly confirmed Ambassador James Cunningham present the United States with a chance to put a new team in place that focuses on the political transition in Afghanistan.
- **Improve coordination with international allies.** The United States should continue to work closely with other key international actors, including all International Security Assistance Force partners and the United Nations, to adopt clear and consistent messaging on the need for electoral reform and better coordination between political reform efforts and reconciliation efforts. The United States and its partners, including the Afghan government, should establish a civilian transition working group to parallel and inform the workings of the security handover, establishing key dates for official handovers and for the process by which the outgoing Karzai administration transfers power to its eventual successor. This should be a top priority issue alongside security

sector capacity and political reconciliation, and is critical to the sustainability of the achievements of the last decade. Moreover, the United States and its partners should not pick favorite candidates for president or give the appearance that it is trying to choose its own candidate for president, as it did in 2009.

- **Maintain emphasis on mutual accountability.** Similar to the U.S. approach in 2010, our support to Afghanistan's 2014 election process should be contingent on the government of Afghanistan taking steps that improve the likelihood of a broadly acceptable outcome, both among the Afghan public and the various political coalitions. Key to this approach should be recognizing the timing and importance of key appointments such as in March of 2013, when both the recently resigned chief electoral officer and chairman of Afghanistan's Independent Election Commission will likely be replaced. Our financial support to the process should be conditional on the appointment of individuals who instill confidence across the broad range of the Afghan political spectrum.
- **Continue efforts for broader political settlement.** In concert with genuine efforts to strengthen the formal Afghan political system, the United States and its diplomatic partners, including regional neighbors such as Pakistan, should continue to support an Afghan-led reconciliation process with the goal of establishing peaceful participation in the political system as an alternative to armed conflict. Initial confidence-building measures have focused on prisoner transfers and other forms of preliminary outreach, but transparent election reforms that show willingness by current power-holders to share power under transparent rules of competition also have the potential to strengthen a settlement process. These two efforts must inform and run parallel to each other if Afghanistan is to attain a level of political stability in the medium- to long-term.

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## Conclusion

The government of Afghanistan has made serious commitments in both the U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement and Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework that United States and international diplomats should recognize as significant accomplishments. In order to build upon these accomplishments, follow-through is needed to develop concrete action plans that can help Afghanistan meet its commitments, particularly as they relate to the 2014 political transition. While useful mechanisms exist to advance the commitments the Afghan government has made in many areas, more work is needed to carry through on commitments for electoral reform and broader democratic strengthening.

The consolidation of much of what has been achieved in Afghanistan will rest on the strength and resiliency of Afghanistan's political system and its ability to serve as an alternative to armed conflict. To ignore the shortcomings in Afghanistan's democratic system at this critical juncture would be a mistake. U.S. and international diplomats have

seemingly recognized this in their recent work in Chicago and Tokyo to secure a strong foundation for pursuing political reform. Their work now, to turn the commitments of the government of Afghanistan into action, will go a long way to determining the ultimate success of our ongoing mission in Afghanistan.

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## Endnotes

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