



Security in Afghanistan

5 Key Areas for U.S. Action

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In late March, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah will visit Washington—their first visit to the United States as a national unity government following a prolonged electoral impasse. Afghanistan’s security is expected to be a primary topic of discussion. Since assuming office, President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah have consistently said that more U.S. troops should remain in Afghanistan than currently committed.¹ Recent comments by senior U.S. military leaders have opened the door to the possibility of adjusting both the troop numbers and the timeline of U.S. military support in Afghanistan.² In Kabul, U.S. commanding general of the NATO force, Gen. John Campbell, has repeatedly stressed the challenges facing the Afghan National Security Forces, or ANSF, in the absence of U.S. force capabilities.³ Newly confirmed U.S. Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter reinforced these concerns in a February 22 discussion in Kabul.⁴ This issue brief outlines the existing gaps in U.S. and NATO support to the ANSF and highlights five critical areas where continued support could make the strategic difference to the ANSF’s ability to secure Afghanistan’s future. As the Obama administration considers adjusting the timeline for the next stage of the U.S. troop drawdown in Afghanistan, the most important consideration must be filling strategic capability shortfalls within the ANSF.

Afghanistan’s security and political landscapes have changed substantially since the initial U.S. and NATO drawdown plan was announced in May 2014.⁵ (see Text Box) The national unity government has thus far been a marked departure from the policies and politics of former President Hamid Karzai. For example, the first act of the national unity government was to sign the U.S.-Afghan Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement, or SCDA—more commonly known as the bilateral security agreement, or BSA—as well as the NATO-Afghanistan Status of Forces Agreement, or SOFA. Demonstrating a political commitment to both reform and security, President Ghani has reopened the investigation into the \$900 million Kabul Bank scandal and has prioritized negotiations with neighboring countries on the long-stalled peace process with the Taliban within his first 100 days in office.⁶ Today’s political landscape is more in line with U.S. strategic interests in security and political reform than it was in the past.⁷

U.S. and NATO post-2014 security commitments to Afghanistan

The NATO and U.S. combat missions in Afghanistan officially ended on December 28, 2014. The post-2014 security commitment by international forces has three main components:⁸

1. **U.S.-Afghanistan Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement and the NATO-Afghan Status of Forces Agreement:** These two legal agreements between the United States, NATO, and Afghanistan authorize foreign troops to perform certain activities when they are present in Afghanistan. The agreements do not have defined end dates or specified troop levels.

- The NATO SOFA only focuses on troop activities for training, advising, and assisting the ANSF.
- The Security and Defense Cooperation Agreement, or SDCA, focuses U.S. troops on two missions—counter-terrorism and training, advising, and assisting the Afghan security forces. More than a typical SOFA, the SCDA also provides for security cooperation between U.S. and Afghan forces, including security assessments coordination and intelligence-sharing, long-term sustainment funding, and, if necessary, considered responses to external aggression against Afghanistan.

2. **U.S. troops in Afghanistan:** In May 2014, President Barack Obama announced an ambitious timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan:⁹

- January 1, 2015: U.S. forces draw down to 9,800 troops based in five key regions. To meet shortfalls in NATO troop commitments, an additional so-called bridging force of 1,000 U.S. forces will remain after January 1, 2015, bringing the total to 10,800 troops.
- January 1, 2016: U.S. forces will draw down by roughly half, estimated around 5,000 troops, and will be consolidated in Kabul and the Bagram airbase, although the Obama administration is reviewing this decision.
- January 1, 2017: U.S. forces will withdraw completely except for an embassy-based Security Assistance Office—expected to be more than the embassy presence of 120 troops that were left in Iraq in 2012—although details remain scarce.

3. **The NATO mission in Afghanistan:** In 2015 and 2016, NATO's Operation Resolute Support Mission, or RSM, will support the development and maintenance of the Afghan military, including the planning, programming, and budgeting process, as well as recruiting, training, managing, and developing personnel. In 2015, RSM has 42 troop-contributing nations from NATO and international partner forces with slightly more than 13,000 troops, including about 7,000 U.S. troops.¹⁰ The NATO mission does not have a specific drawdown timeline, although it is expected to follow the U.S. drawdown timeline:¹¹

- Over the medium term, NATO has committed to financial and military support to Afghanistan and the ANSF through 2017.
- Over the long term, the NATO-Afghanistan Enduring Partnership will continue NATO's relationship with Afghan security institutions.

On the other hand, the worsening security situation is exacerbating existing weaknesses within the ANSF. The 352,000-strong ANSF—made up of the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army—suffered 4,634 casualties in 2014, a 6.5 percent increase over 2013.¹² Lt. Gen. Joseph Anderson, the top coalition commander in Afghanistan, termed this casualty rate “unsustainable.” While the ANSF have held or retaken the majority of territory threatened by insurgents, they have done so without the same level of coalition air and intelligence support that they relied on in previous years and without the backstop of coalition combat forces.¹³ Poor combat leadership has resulted in high casualty rates and attrition. Afghan ministerial leadership has neglected critical sustainment needs as well, including recruitment and ensuring that ANSF soldiers receive necessary combat equipment, are paid regularly, and receive regular leave.¹⁴ Without substantial recruitment to offset the losses, the Afghan National Army now numbers 169,203—its lowest force strength since August 2011.¹⁵ Left unaddressed, these trends will erode the ANSF and could undermine the Afghan people’s support for the newly created national unity government.

Indeed, Afghans are making individual political and economic decisions that in aggregate undercut the government. The annual Asia Foundation survey of Afghan attitudes noted an increased perception in personal insecurity in 2014 and an increased fear of travel within the country.¹⁶ Violence against civilians rose 22 percent in 2014, a record high since the United Nations began reporting in 2009.¹⁷ Opium production, a prime source of Taliban and criminal revenues, is up 7 percent in 2014—with all production occurring in insecure areas—and is expected to be even higher in 2015.¹⁸ Decisions made by Afghans based on their political and economic insecurity can have long-term consequences for the viability of the national unity government.

However, these negative security trends are far from a foregone conclusion. The U.S., NATO and Afghan priority is to ensure the ANSF can maintain the security lead and guarantee that a large international force is never again needed. Any potential adjustments to the U.S. and NATO drawdown timeline should focus on targeted U.S. and international support in critical areas. This support ranges from short-term tactical needs in air support and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, or ISR, to long-term institutional development on planning, programming, and budgeting—all areas where the United States has and can provide continued support under the current legal framework underpinning the U.S. and international force presence in Afghanistan.¹⁹

The Obama administration has already acknowledged the need to adjust U.S. military support due to gaps in Afghan capabilities. In November 2014, as the security transition approached, the Obama administration permitted the U.S. train, advise, and assist mission to include combat operations using ground forces, manned aircraft, and drones after the ANSF took the lead for the combat mission.²⁰ Under the U.S. mission, U.S. commanders can now authorize operations under three sets of circumstances: counterterrorism operations, protection of U.S. forces, and assistance to the ANSF.²¹ This updated

authorization for U.S. commanders, particularly the ability to use aircraft, recognized that the United States brings unique capabilities that the ANSF has yet to develop, particularly air combat and intelligence support.

With the security environment and the ANSF increasingly challenged, the United States faces a choice of how and when it will support the ANSF. The five areas below outline a clear set of capability commitments that the United States and NATO should consider in order to keep the ANSF effective in the long term.

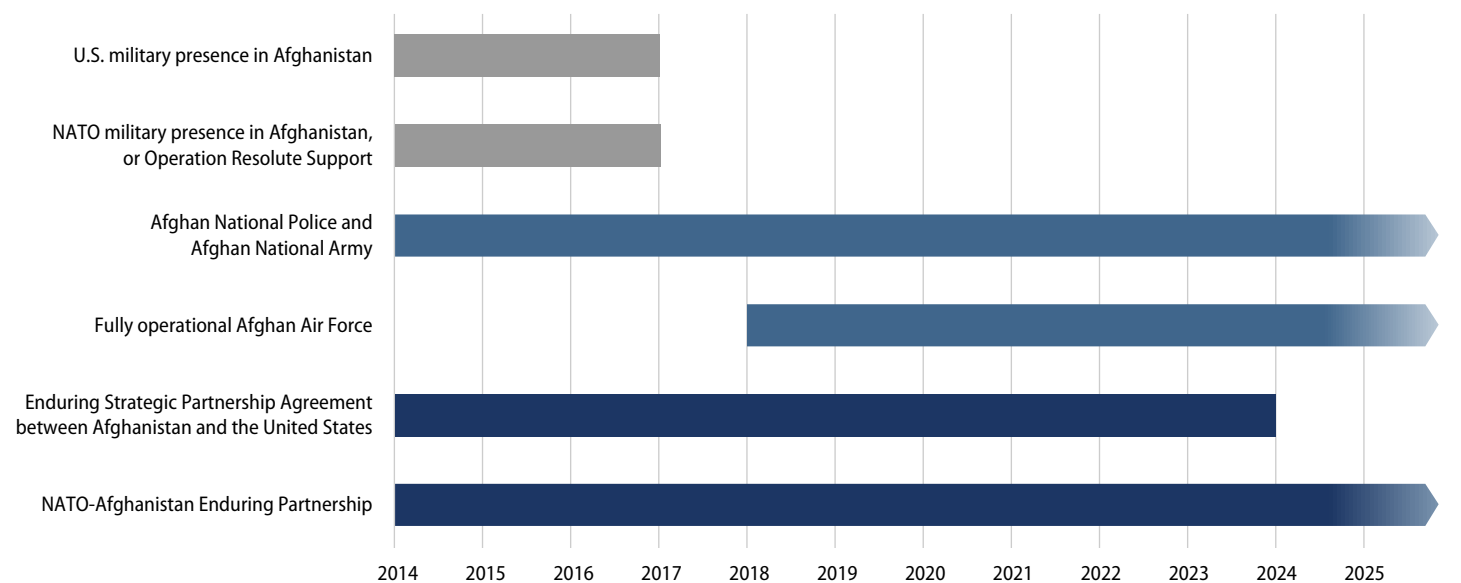
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Immediate needs: 2016

Under the current drawdown plan, U.S. forces will only operate outside of Kabul in 2015.²² At the end of 2015, U.S. forces will consolidate in bases in Kabul and Bagram, which will limit the range of vital U.S. air support. However, according to U.S. and NATO planning, the Afghan Air Force, or AAF, is not scheduled to have full operational capability until 2017 or 2018, leaving 2016 as a critical gap year.²³ The ANSF continues to rely on U.S. air capability for three functions that provide it with tactical superiority over insurgent groups: lethal capability through close air support and air-to-ground attacks; accelerated mobility around mountainous terrain and roads potentially laced with improvised explosive devices; and airborne ISR.²⁴

FIGURE 1
Afghan security timelines

International support, ANSF capabilities, and international partnership commitments



Sources: The White House, "Fact Sheet: Bringing the U.S. War in Afghanistan to a Responsible End," Press release, May 27, 2014, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/27/fact-sheet-bringing-us-war-afghanistan-responsible-end>; NATO, "Wales Summit Declaration on Afghanistan," September 4, 2014, available at http://nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_112517.htm; Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and United States of America, "Enduring Strategic Partnership between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012), available at <http://mfa.gov.af/en/page/3881>; Department of Defense, *Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan* (2014), available at http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Oct2014_Report_Final.pdf.

1. **Bridge ANSF air capabilities for close air support and mobility:** The ANSF has limited capability in these functions and is not sufficiently consistent to maintain a tactical superiority.²⁵ The AAF has already taken on basic responsibilities such as cargo delivery for the ANSF.²⁶ But the AAF is not scheduled to be fully functional until at least 2017 according to U.S. development plans. To bridge these gaps, the United States and NATO need a two-pronged approach. First, as part of the training effort, U.S. and NATO commanders must focus on a quality cadre of AAF officers primarily capable of close air support. Second, NATO coalition leaders should bridge the mobility gap by providing lift and transportation assistance through the end of 2016 and potentially longer. For transport, the United States and Germany are the only remaining NATO partners with air assets available in the country.²⁷ Even after the consolidation of U.S. and NATO forces in Kabul and Bagram, German and U.S. air assets could keep the ANSF mobile and responsive until the AAF is fully operational in 2017 at the earliest.

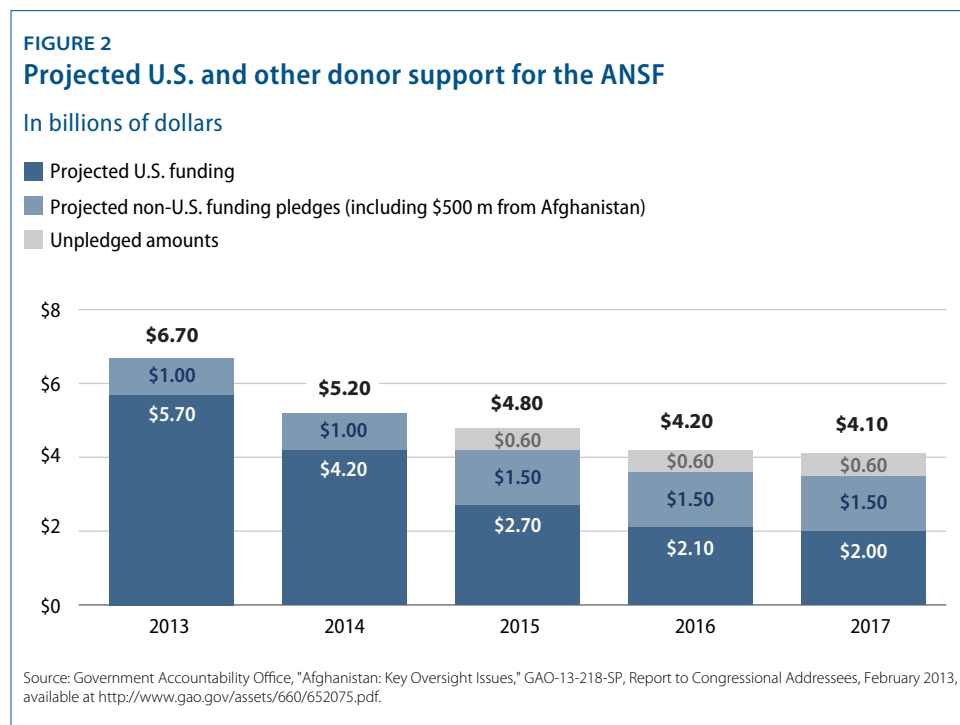
2. **Provide ISR outputs:** Post-2014, the ANSF will not inherit U.S. and NATO ISR systems, including surveillance drones, which require significant manpower and maintenance that the ANSF cannot provide.²⁸ Instead, ANSF commanders are expected to gather intelligence using their “human intelligence legacy, as well as low-grade networking equipment, radios, cellphones, cameras on turboprops and signals intelligence towers.”²⁹ The AAF’s aerial photography and ISR program is still rudimentary.³⁰ It is unclear if President Obama’s recently announced guidelines on air support to Afghan forces in 2015 in fact authorize the use of surveillance drones for ANSF purposes. For as long as U.S. and NATO forces are operating in Afghanistan, their ISR capabilities should be used to support ANSF targeting.

3. **Maintain regional connectivity:** Similar to the limited one-year combat support announced by President Obama, 2015 will also be the only year that U.S. and NATO forces will serve in regional ANSF training bases.³¹ For the past 13 years, U.S. and NATO troops have served as a parallel, albeit informal, chain from the Afghan forces in the field to the ministries of defense and interior in Kabul. The Afghan regional commands must coordinate operations; become proficient with the ministries of defense and interior processes to fulfill equipment, logistics, pay, and personnel needs; and at the same time, continue to build the trust of the Afghan people they secure.³² Even as the U.S. and NATO advisors are consolidated in Kabul and the Bagram airfield in 2016, they must continue to visit the regional commands—perhaps alongside Afghan defense and interior-ministry officials—to provide temporary advice and assessment.

Medium-term needs: 2017 and beyond

With reduced and consolidated U.S. and NATO troops in 2016, the ANSF will need to adjust to the diminished access to international capabilities and support. Even as they do, the cloudy timeline and uncertainties regarding the future of international support could further inhibit ANSF planning.

Securing reliable funding for the ANSF is perhaps the single biggest factor to ensure ANSF medium-term survival. The previous national Afghan army dissolved in 1992 months after Soviet financial support abruptly ended.³³ Afghanistan, however, has consistently been unable to fund more than \$386 million of the more than \$6 billion in annual military needs.³⁴ Recognizing this shortfall, NATO and other international partners at the 2012 Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan pledged to continue providing support from 2015 to 2017.³⁵



4. Seek support now: Maintaining international assistance for the ANSF will ensure financial predictability for the force. However, the current pledges to the ANSF are only made through 2017. NATO should use the 2015–2016 timeframe to work closely with the ANSF and assess their needs in order to allow enough time to consider a new ANSF size and cost in time for the 2016 summit in Warsaw. At the 2014 Wales summit, NATO pledged to follow a conditions-based assessment. This assessment can best be conducted while U.S. and NATO forces are still in Afghanistan. Furthermore, planning now for the post-2016 ANSF will ensure that international pledges are sought in time for national budget cycles.

5. **Begin outlining the Office of Security Cooperation, or OSC, needs:** The U.S. decision to fully transition to OSC in 2017 leaves an uncertain future for U.S.-Afghan coordination. Afghanistan's ministries of defense and interior will require several years of continued support in order to build sustainable processes. Currently, the ministries' financial management does not meet international standards—a requirement for receiving direct U.S. funding rather than through an internationally managed trust fund. Corruption and its side effects of attrition and recruiting deficits continue to corrode public confidence.

The OSC office should be structured to provide long-term support to address the following ANSF institutional needs:

- **Financial management:** The audit and financial management system within the ministries of defense and interior continues to lack transparency.³⁶ The RSM will need to target these financial management skills throughout 2015 and 2016. In order to build confidence in the Afghan process for another international ANSF funding commitment at the 2016 NATO summit, the Afghan financial system will have to display tangible progress toward greater transparency and accountability such as by increasing the reporting of both ministries' execution of U.S. assistance and strengthening payroll and expenditure processes.³⁷ The SDCA notes that U.S. contributions will funnel through Afghan institutions only when these institutions meet international standards of transparency and accountability.³⁸
- **Recruiting:** Attrition, recruiting, and retention continues to be a substantial challenge to the coherence and competence of the ANSF. In the short term, NATO must work to bolster a transparent and systemic Afghan recruiting and vetting process, especially in light of ongoing insider attacks, most recently in January 2015, on international personnel.³⁹ Furthermore, NATO must be central to helping ANSF formulate career paths that can promote quality, develop leaders, and manage retention. Literacy programs will remain key to this goal.
- **Logistics:** U.S. and NATO commanders warn of logistics concerns affecting ANSF capabilities.⁴⁰ Building logistics and supply chains is complex and generally relies on civil servants to define needs, develop solutions, and ultimately oversee implementation, often through contracts. U.S. and NATO advisors should actively support their Afghan ministerial counterparts in the short term to set up these contracts and should consider civilian advisors post-2016 to continue reinforcing logistics management best practices.
- **Anticorruption:** According to a Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, or SIGAR report, “corruption has undermined the development of ANSF independence” and Afghans continue to report repeated incidents of ANSF corruption.^{41, 42} President Ghani's anticorruption plan from the December 2014 London Conference on Afghanistan includes the formation of an “independent

anti-corruption mission with time-bound prosecution powers” and a commitment to merit-based appointments, both of which should be applied to the ANSF.^{43,44} Once details are in place, U.S. advisors in the regions and Afghan ministries should reinforce the anticorruption process by advising regional and ministerial counterparts on integrating anticorruption efforts into their force management.

Achieving efficiency in the above areas will require extensive technical support. In addition to a few hundred personnel at the U.S. embassy—expected to be considerably larger than the 120 troops left at the U.S. Embassy in Iraq in 2013⁴⁵—the OSC could utilize U.S. Department of Defense civilians under the Defense Institution Reform Initiative, or DIRI, and the Ministry of Defense Advisors, or MoDA, program; these civilians would not count toward the U.S. troop numbers. NATO should consider a similar security assistance office, ensuring that NATO advisors can also provide institutional expertise.

Conclusion

The above five areas highlight gaps in the ANSF that will undermine their ability to provide sustained security to the Afghan people if left unaddressed. The United States has unique abilities—militarily, financially, and diplomatically—to address these gaps through existing support and advise mechanisms by targeting key needs.

Ultimately, for all of these areas to be successful, the Afghan government and ANSF must commit to filling these gaps—U.S. support cannot and should not be indefinite. The visit of President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah offer an opportunity for the United States and Afghanistan to develop a security drawdown plan that leverages U.S. capabilities and spurs Afghan commitment to meet these very capabilities. With a new Afghan government that shares U.S. goals and has committed to addressing deep structural challenges such as corruption and reconciliation, the Obama administration should seize this moment.

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The views expressed in this article by Ariella Viehe are her own and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Department of State or the U.S. Government.

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