Afghanistan Transition

Elevating the Diplomatic Components of the Transition Strategy at the Chicago NATO Summit and Beyond

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Introduction and summary

Between May 20 and May 21, North Atlantic Treaty Organization heads of state will convene in Chicago to hammer out decisions regarding the handover of responsibility for securing Afghanistan to local forces and the removal of the bulk of foreign troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014.

For the past 18 months, the Obama administration has rightly pressed a strategy of transition in Afghanistan—reducing the U.S. military presence and encouraging Afghan responsibility. Recognizing that a sustainable transition also requires a political settlement among Afghanistan’s diverse factions, the administration has also sought to facilitate an Afghan peace process through outreach to insurgent elements and the Afghan government.

On May 1, 2012, President Barack Obama and Afghan President Hamid Karzai took a step forward with this vision of transition by signing the Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States and Afghanistan. This agreement outlines a set of mutual commitments between the two countries, with the goal of shifting the long-term relationship toward a more “normalized” one following the withdrawal of the majority of U.S. troops in 2014.¹

But current transition planning, while correct in its broad strategic strokes, continues to focus too heavily on the military components of the plan and in particular on the Afghan National Security Forces. Missing from the NATO conference’s agenda and U.S. government planning efforts is a meaningful discussion of the political dimensions of the transition—how NATO’s security transition and international troop drawdown will affect the tenuous power balance that has existed in the country since 2001 among Afghanistan’s various factions and how the security transition will sync with the impending political transition, when Afghans go to the polls for the 2014 presidential election.

The NATO conference will focus on the commitments made to the Afghan government as part of the transition strategy, but the Afghan government needs to provide
commitments in return, or there needs to be a plan for consequences of inaction. The U.S.-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership Agreement includes pledges from the Afghan government in terms of tackling corruption, improving governance, and strengthening financial management. But, as in the past, the agreement does not specify what U.S. commitments are tied to Afghan government performance.

The international community has instead opted to separate these political conversations from the security ones and shift those concerns to a lower-profile conference of international donors taking place in Tokyo in July. Putting off this vital discussion on Afghanistan’s political future makes the Chicago summit a missed opportunity, given the degree to which these issues are intrinsically linked to Afghanistan’s security.

Politics ultimately drive the Afghan conflict and consequently hold the key to its resolution. The insular nature of the Afghan government is in fact alienating much of its population and contributing to insurgent mobilization—a reality that threatens the Afghan government if a broader political consensus among the Afghan public is not reached.

Indeed, the most recent public Pentagon assessment of the conflict cautions that the insurgency continues to receive support from external sponsors, including Pakistan, and warns that progress in training Afghan soldiers and police is undercut by “widespread corruption, dependence on international aid and mentoring support, and an imbalance of power that favors the executive branch over the legislative and judicial branches.” Despite some successes in disrupting insurgent control of Afghan territory over the past two years, the insurgency’s organizational capabilities appear to be resilient, challenging the ability of the Afghan security forces to stem insurgent expansion.

The United States must strike the right balance between providing enduring support and continuing the ongoing transition to Afghan responsibility. While continued support for Afghanistan’s stability is an important interest for the United States and its international partners, the withdrawal of U.S. forces as part of the transition to an Afghanistan secured by local forces is essential for both broader U.S. strategic interests and for the development of a more stable political equilibrium within the country.

Large-scale foreign military involvement in Afghanistan distorts the current balance of power within the country and allows Afghan leaders to avoid making difficult but essential political reforms. It also serves as a recruiting tool for Afghan insurgents, who exploit the population’s resentment of international forces to
justify their cause. Other countries in the region remain suspicious of NATO, and in particular U.S. intentions, inviting spoiler behavior.

Moreover, the large financial commitment supporting U.S. and NATO military personnel, coupled with the lack of public accountability mechanisms within the Afghan government, has exacerbated corruption within both the Afghan government and the broader Afghan society—not only undermining the Afghan government’s legitimacy but also indirectly funding insurgent activity.4

This imbalance and lack of synchronization between the military and political components of transition planning and implementation increases the risk of insecurity in Afghanistan in the medium and long terms. The main thrust of the U.S. and NATO International Security Assistance Force transition continues to be military operations against insurgents, especially in the south and now increasingly in the east, along with the establishment of a large Afghan national army and police force of approximately 352,000 personnel, which will assume responsibility for ongoing conflict as international forces decline in number.

Placing sole responsibility for Afghanistan’s future stability on the Afghan National Security Forces without making progress in creating a stronger political consensus among Afghanistan’s diverse factions—both armed and unarmed—is a high-risk gamble. While the NATO International Security Assistance Force has met its targets as far as the number of Afghan forces trained, the capacities and loyalties of these forces, in combination with uncertain funding streams, puts their long-term viability in doubt.

The Afghan government will face a serious test in 2014, as President Karzai, under the provisions of the Afghan constitution, transfers power to another democratically elected Afghan leader. Significant work remains to be done by the Afghan government and its sponsors to support efforts to strengthen their political system, including establishing political parties, ensuring the independence of election officials, and establishing a voter registration system or viable alternative in order to avoid a repeat of the highly contentious elections of 2009 and 2010.

As the United States manages the transition and continues the reduction of its military and financial investments in Afghanistan, it retains an interest in both Afghan and regional stability and in preserving the gains and sacrifices of the past 11 years of the Afghan mission, especially for Afghan women and minority groups. Doing so requires committing to a settlement that can accommodate a more sustainable political consensus in Afghanistan.
With U.S. and NATO troops rightly shifting more quickly to an advising, assistance, and mentoring role and away from combat operations throughout the next year, U.S. policymakers must reorient their strategic focus toward the political and diplomatic processes best suited to addressing the crux of Afghanistan’s problems: the political dimensions of the conflict that drive insurgent recruitment and opposition to the government.

President Obama hit the right notes in the Strategic Partnership Agreement and during his speech at Bagram Air Base earlier this month when he coupled a commitment to a handover of responsibility to Afghan leaders with calls for a negotiated peace settlement and for Afghan government reforms. In order to make good on these goals, we have outlined in this paper a clear set of recommendations for U.S. officials and NATO leaders to follow:

- Begin serious preparations for the 2014 Afghan presidential elections now, including support for free and fair elections, political outreach to different political parties and leaders, and the establishment of governmental checks and balances outside of the country’s executive branch.

- Facilitate an inclusive and transparent Afghan peace negotiations process among the various factions, in concert with regional diplomatic efforts.

- Clarify expectations for the Afghan government through a set of conditions and incentives tied to Afghan government performance.

- Align military and political efforts in support of a credible political transition and an inclusive settlement process, while pursuing a steady drawdown of U.S. forces beyond the fall of 2012.

A transition to Afghan ownership and the drawdown of foreign forces is the right approach for the long-term interests of Afghanistan, the region, and the United States and its NATO partners. But for this approach to be successful and sustainable, there must be a clear recognition by all involved that a security transition is inextricably linked to a political transition. Clearly, more work needs to be done to prioritize and carry out the steps necessary for a durable resolution to the political issues at the core of the conflict.
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