

Avoiding Creeping Defeat in Afghanistan:

The Need for Realistic Assumptions, Strategy, and Plans

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Note: This draft is being circulated for comments and suggestions. Please provide them to acordesman@gmail.com

The US is not losing the war in Afghanistan in the classic military sense. The US, its allies, and Afghan forces still win virtually every direct military encounter. The problem is that this is a political war where the political impact of combat, politics, governance, and economics are far more important than tactical success in directly defeating the enemy. At this level, the insurgents still seem to have significant momentum and are certainly not being decisively defeated.

Moreover, tactical military success is no guarantee of a successful Transition. The choice between victory or defeat will also center around the success or failure of the Afghan government and Afghan forces after most US and ISAF forces largely withdraw in 2014, and major cuts occur in aid and military spending. As was the case in Vietnam, the US can win every battle and still lose the war.

Vacuous Conferences and Concepts Instead of Real Strategy and Transparency

In spite of the vacuous claims and token numbers that came out of largely symbolic conferences in Chicago and Tokyo, there is no public evidence that the US and ISAF have really reversed insurgent momentum in Afghanistan or created conditions where tactical victories will have lasting strategic meaning. The civil effort lags far behind the military effort. While there have been some successes in some aspects of Afghan governance and development, they are so limited and fragile they may well not survive beyond 2015.

There is no clear strategy for Transition in terms of concrete plans, credible resources, and meaningful measures of effectiveness. The US and its allies have failed to show that there is any meaningful path towards even a modest definition of lasting “victory.” Both the civil and military efforts in Afghanistan have failed to provide any public plans and spending profiles to support Transition.

It is unclear that the US and ISAF have effective plans to deal with the political nature of the war they are fighting, or credible plans for development of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). It is equally unclear that the US or other donors have effective plans to develop the levels of governance and economic development that can win lasting support for the Afghan government and Transition.

The Chicago and Tokyo conferences produced empty concepts, pledges and spin – not credible or effective plans for moving forward. They did not produce any meaningful level of transparency as to how Transition can actually proceed, or even the outlines of plans for the period between 2012 and 2015 or measures to show progress and credibly define success.

More broadly, the US, ISAF, and UNAMA have all failed to produce a meaningful level of transparency and sense of direction over the last two years. The search for peace negotiations is more illusory than real, as are many claims of military and civil progress. The end result is that outside support for the war continues to decline in the US, other ISAF countries, and donor states. Pledges to stay through 2014 and to 2020 are becoming steadily less convincing in real world terms, and no government has yet displayed the level of honesty necessary to sustain public support.

It is unclear that there are workable answers to many of Afghanistan’s problems, and it is all too clear that US efforts to make Pakistan into a real partner or ally will fail. At the same time, it

may still be possible for the US to lead its allies and the Afghan government and forces into a form of Transition that will offer Afghanistan a reasonable hope of security and prospects for future economic development. The result may fall far short of the ambitious goals set early in the war, or the spin and promises that have followed, but a more limited form of success -- based on an "Afghanistan as good as it can actually get" -- may still be possible.

Looking Beyond the "Spin cycle:" The Gap Between Spin, Lies, Illusions, and Real World Goals

No form of "victory" or favorable strategic outcome can be achieved by continuing to lie about progress to date or the realistic prospects for success. Like Vietnam, the end game in Afghanistan has become a liar's contest, and one the US and its allies are steadily losing -- along with command integrity -- at the highest levels.

While no senior official will say it publically, the US and its allies have already had to give up on some initial goals and Transition faces many serious challenges:

Pakistan is not a real ally and will not become one

Pakistan will continue to pursue its own strategic interests in Afghanistan, continue to offer sanctuary to the Taliban and other insurgents, and will focus on controlling influence of Pashtun border areas and ensuring that Indian influence is too limited to be a threat. Pakistan has no real interest in making Afghanistan part of any regional economic development effort or "New Silk Road," and will seek to use Afghanistan rather than aid it.

US aid can bribe Pakistan to open its LOCs through the end of 2014, but not to change its basic goals and policies. Moreover, more than a decade of war has made most of Pakistan's population hostile to the US, and senior Pakistanis are now describing US UCAV strikes as war crimes. Any continued US counterterrorist activities after 2014 will mean an ongoing low-level confrontation with Pakistan, not real cooperation.

The US cannot defeat fully Al Qa'ida or the threat of Islamist extremist terrorism, in Afghanistan

The US has made major progress in pushing Al Qaida out of Afghanistan, and in killing senior Al Qaida officials in Pakistan. Al Qa'ida will, however, survive Transition. Al Qa'ida has continued to gain more ideological influence over Afghan and other extremist groups in the region, and has seen a shift in its power centers to Yemen, the Horn, Levant, Maghreb, and Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as a rebirth of some of its strength in Iraq.

Turmoil in the Arab and Islamic world, confrontation with Iran, growing Sunni-Shi'ite tensions, and Islamist extremist versus moderate struggles will all combine to ensure that the center of gravity of international terrorism remains outside Afghanistan. The key focus of the struggle must be in other areas.

There is little prospect of a meaningful, stable negotiated settlement with the Taliban and Haqqani Network

Claim after claim of progress in dealing with the leadership of the Taliban and other insurgent factions have failed to produce any convincing indications of progress. The Taliban and

“Emirate” have so far treated negotiations as an extension of war by other means, gaming the US, ISAF, and Afghan government while Pakistan continues to lay its own game. Desirable as a negotiated solution might be, the case of Afghanistan has offered almost no prospect of letting the insurgent win by the kinds of negotiations that took place in Cambodia and Nepal.

The US, its allies, and the ANSF cannot establish security on a national level or in all of the “critical” districts by end 2014, or at any predictable point thereafter

Even under optimistic conditions, insurgents will dominate important areas in the east and south, and islands in other parts of the country. Tribal feuding and primitive justice will still exist, federal policy will be limited and corrupt, narco-traffickers and criminal gangs will play a major role, and road movements at night will continue to present risks. As in Iraq, Transition will occur with significant continuing levels of insurgent and other forms of violence, and with no clear point at which the violence, crime, and insecurity will end.

Development of the Afghan security forces now focuses on rushing towards numbers on unobtainable levels of effectiveness without clear plans to deal with funding and self-sustainment

The training effort has virtually ceased to publically communicate any meaningful data, and NTM-A keeps issuing claims of success without transparency or credibility. The Chicago Conference set undefined funding goals unrelated to any clear force plan, and set goals for cutting the force without regard to future conditions. The current build-up reflects an effort to expand at least two years faster than really seems practical, then to redefine “readiness” to make this seem practical.

Corruption, nepotism, ethnic and sectarian splits, and the role of power brokers is grossly understated in all public reporting or simply ignored. The ability to create a credible, sustainable ANA for 2014 and beyond is not explained, and the role of a highly corrupt mix of police forces in dealing with the justice system and insurgency has virtually no transparency or public credibility. Public estimates of future outside aid, trainers, and partners also lack transparency and credibility.

Transition will not convert Afghanistan into a developed, functional democracy with effective governance, civil rights, and rule of law

The US, its allies, and other donor states have created some elements of representative government, improved standards of living, and made major advances in education and medical care. Afghanistan remains, however, one of the poorest countries in the world. Many claims of progress are grossly exaggerated; corruption and gross inequalities of income are the rule.

Although an election is due in 2014, it is far from clear this can make things better or will be any more legitimate than the last election. Karzai’s well-known weaknesses have recently been compounded by the ousting of key ministers. Despite Karzai’s flaws, there is no clear alternative

for the presidency, while the legislature is effective only in creating problems rather than solving them.

Progress in governance lags far behind need, and governance is not representative of local needs and priorities

The central government has far too much power concentrated in the presidency and a weak dysfunctional legislature. Money that goes through the government goes through a corrupt and politicized presidency. The provinces and districts have no ability to raise or control money and governance is often poor and/or corrupt at the provincial and district levels.

Rule of law is often marginal, and the de facto justice system is sometimes run by the Taliban where it is not tribal and traditional. Real progress in human rights lags far beyond Western goals and the letter of Afghan law, particularly in the more traditional elements of the Pashtun population. This will not change by the 2014 election, and it is far from clear that it will change radically by 2020.

Economic growth and development are more illusory than real, and sustaining them through Transition will require serious, well planned outside aid rather than the vacuous goals and pledges of the Tokyo Conference

It is unclear that anyone needs an active enemy to make Transition fail when the State Department, USAID, and others keep making exaggerated claims about economic progress, and fail to honestly assess the impact of massive upcoming cuts in in-country military spending and aid.

Even the World Bank – which so far has emerged with the only remotely credible effort to assess the economics of Transition, seems unwilling to examine the full range of risks of cutting spending and aid during the most critical years of Transition – coupled to increasing dependence on a narco-economy (already at least 15% of the GDP). The World Bank does not adequately address corruption, capital flight, and the high level of remaining risks and threats that will exist through 2014 and well beyond.

The reality, however, is that Afghanistan is now likely to plunge into a major recession unless the US and other donors both design credible annual aid levels and plans, and can create mechanisms that ensure the money is used with far more integrity and effectiveness.

The “New Silk Road” and hopes for major coordinated efforts at regional development are now a dysfunctional facade

Afghanistan needs all the help it can get in terms of foreign investment and development, as well as improved infrastructure. The fact remains, however, that neighboring states, and key regional powers like China, India, and Russia are not going to make massive investments in Afghanistan that will lead to significant income gains for large numbers of Afghans until years in the future, and then only when Afghanistan offers suitable security, proper laws, and less corruption.

Key countries like Pakistan have no serious interest in the New Silk Road. Central Asia looks east, west, and north. Iran is interested only in developing its own Western economy and securing its northwest. Some improvement is possible, indeed probable, but not on the scale that

will help Afghanistan move through 2014 or the years that immediately follow, deal with dire poverty and unemployment or cope with a per capita income that the CIA ranks 213th in the world, even if one ignores gross inequalities in income distribution.

“Afghanistan as Good as it Can Actually Get”: Setting Credible Goals for Transition and the War

At one level, this may seem like an extremely discouraging list of areas where “Afghan desirable” and “Afghan perfect” simply will not happen. It makes a sharp, if not brutal, contrast in showing that the real world prospects for Transition bear little relation to the hype and exaggeration of international conferences and far too much US, allied, and UN reporting.

The fact is, however, that overselling the war is not helping, or building credibility and support. It is instead distorting the civil and military efforts, wasting massive amounts of resources, and leading the decision makers and commanders directly involved in the war to embrace the existing mission in ways that further weaken the already limited chance of success. While the end result may not be deliberately dishonest, the lack of objectivity and realism produces that result – discrediting the war as the wagons are drawn into tighter and tighter defensive circles, there is less and less real transparency, and credibility declines.

At the same time, realism does offer a better chance of producing plans and actions that may still be able to serve US, Afghan, allied and donor interests and make a more modest form of Transition possible: what might be called “Afghanistan as good as it can really get.”

This may well be an Afghanistan with a weaker central government than is desirable, far more fragmented centers of political and military power than current planners want, some areas under insurgent control and many under continuing insurgent challenge. The insurgents, however, are neither popular, united, nor are they all that strong. The “Afghan as good as it can really get” may still be able to hold together in some form after massive cuts take place in ISAF forces and aid, and do so without support from Pakistan and in spite of self-centered pressures from other states in the region.

Deal with Pakistan on a pragmatic basis: What the US now gets from Pakistan is all it can hope to get for a reasonable ~~bribe~~ price

The US has no good options for dealing with Pakistan. The best it can do is use aid and influence as limited tools to win limited concessions, and make hard choices as to whether a US military presence in Afghanistan can continue to be used indefinitely to attack extremist and terrorist groups located in Pakistan.

As the US has learned (or should have learned) over the last decade, Pakistan will continue to focus on India as threat, seek to dominate at least the Pashtun border areas of Afghanistan, exploit Afghan insurgents and given them sanctuary when it serves Pakistan’s perceptions of its interests, and see any Indian role in Afghanistan as a threat.

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In practice, this limits the US to finding out whether it can pay off Pakistan for limited cooperation at an acceptable price, keeping its LOC and air transit options open in Central Asia to the extent necessary to deal with a greatly reduced presence, and living with the fact that Transition will not end Afghan insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan. In fact, Afghan insurgents may well have tacit Pakistani support in expanding their influence in Afghanistan’s eastern and southern border areas.

The day may come when Pakistan sees Al Qa’ida, the Taliban, and Haqqani Network as threats that are so critical that it will risk open war in the FATA, Waziristan, and Baluchistan. There is no way to predict this, however, and it raises a critical policy issue. The US has rationalized keeping a counterterrorism force in Afghanistan after 2014 on the basis of Afghan needs, but it no longer has a SOF presence in Pakistan. Moreover, the US can only attack terrorist and insurgent targets in Pakistan by using UCAVs and SOF raids in ways that senior Pakistani officials have recently taken to calling war crimes.

The question for the US during 2012-2014 - and then during 2014-2020 - is whether this is sustainable or worth the cost. This answer may be yes, but it could then make Pakistani cooperation in providing air rights and LOCs even more erratic or more unaffordable, and lead Pakistan to be even more aggressive in supporting its own Pashtun and insurgent factions from 2014 onwards. The only way to find out is the hard way, and this will present a serious risk to the overall success of Transition in Afghanistan indefinitely into the future.

Moreover, the cost-benefits involved will be made even more uncertain by the growth of Al Qa’ida, other violent Sunni extremism, and Sunni-Shi’ite tensions in other areas in Central Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, and the Horn. The US must carefully monitor the cost-benefits of continuing to deal with counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Pakistan relative to the fact that they both no longer are the centers of Al Qa’ida and other extremist threats.

Prepare to deal with continued insurgent control in parts of Eastern and Southern Afghanistan, and significant insurgent influence in in other parts of the country well after 2014

The US cannot plan to defeat the Taliban and other insurgents by 2014, or for Afghan governance and forces to do so through 2020. As is the case in Iraq, and was the case in Vietnam, the threat will continue indefinitely. There is no way to predict its level of resurgence as US and other ISAF forces drop, and Transition planning cannot be based on post-2014 security in military terms, political terms, or economic terms.

The present US and ISAF strategy has failed in its ability to secure the border areas, all critical Districts, and Districts of interest. At best, 2014-2020 will still be a war of political (and sometimes military) attrition between what emerges by way of Afghan central governance and

the ANSF; regional/ethnic/sectarian factions and warlords; tribal areas; and influence/control by various insurgent factions.

It will be a struggle to create a mix of central government and regional/local power that can hold key population centers and as much of the country as possible, rather than focus on a nation-wide counterinsurgency effort. It will mean doing more and more the Afghan way on Afghan terms -- even when this means reliance on effective local and regional powerbrokers, and accepting the fact that tribalism, a functional level of corruption and nepotism, reliance on local custom and values, and limits to human rights and the rule of law will sometimes be the price tag. A live compromise will be better than a dead ideal.

It is currently impossible to even guess how serious these problems will be. US and ISAF reporting focuses on tactical measures like enemy initiated and complex attacks that grossly favor US and allied military forces at a time when the insurgents have no reason to concentrate on directly attacking them. Instead, the insurgents have every reason to seek to expand their influence without directly fighting, attack the Afghan government, use tactics like green-blue attacks to speed US/ISAF withdrawal, push aid workers and NGOs out, and further diminish already weak popular support for the war.

Until the US and ISAF go back to honestly and publically assessing areas of insurgent control and influence, the full range of insurgent violence and its political intent and impact, and how this compares with areas of Afghan government and ANSF influence and control, their reporting will lack the scope and integrity to deserve either outside trust or make effective Transition planning possible.

It does, however, seem likely that the US, its allies, and Afghan forces have done enough damage to the various insurgent factions so that a combination of international aid, effective Afghan leadership, and ANSF efforts could contain the insurgents to limited areas in the border and stop them from gaining control of major population centers. The result would still be a war of political attrition, but one that a combination of the Afghan government and local and regional/ethnic forces might both contain and win after 2014.

There is no way to make a firm estimate of this. No one can predict the future quality of Afghan leadership progress in the different elements of the ANSF, or the level of continued outside aid and support. There is no credible military and political baseline to work with as long as the US and ISAF avoid public transparency and focus instead on spin and deliberate omission of key aspects of the war to the point where reporting becomes a de facto liars' contest.

The practical solution is sixfold;

- First, it is to create an honest baseline of reporting and trend analysis based on the political nature of the war and a net assessment of each side.
- Second, it is to create credible civil and military plans for affordable levels of aid, and make both publically transparent in an effort to win sustained US and international support on a credible and sustainable basis.
- Third, it is to make all aid conditional on the level of progress in Afghan politics, force development, and use of economic aid.

- Fourth, it is to focus US and outside resources on holding key populated areas while securing only those other areas where the Afghan central government, and/or key Afghan leaders are strong and popular enough to accept the eventual transfer of responsibility of, and can hold their position. This will sometimes mean transferring power back to regional and local leaders on their terms -- and using aid and security assistance to support them – in order to achieve some form of effective governance and security to combat the insurgents. It means more emphasis on backing the Afghan leaders at every effective level, even if it means “doing it their way”. This is a better alternative to setting unrealistic standards or backing the central government where and when it cannot lead and take effective control.
- Fifth it is to phase down aid and outside military support with careful attention to absorption capability and real world time schedules for effective action, and move towards self-funding in as carefully planned a manner as time permits. Throwing money at the problem in ways that facilitate waste and corruption, setting goals Afghans don't want and can't achieve, losing sight of priorities and focus on projects, and ignoring the inevitable cuts in outside funding and need for self-sustainment have been immensely destructive aspects of the civil and military efforts throughout the war. Repeating them during the most critical phase of transition is a recipe for total failure.
- And finally, it is to accept the fact that the Afghan insurgency may drag on indefinitely and that insurgents are certain to have de facto control over some parts of the country after 2014. This is a reality that the US, its allies, and aid donors must be prepared to live with.

Accept the fact there is little prospect of a meaningful, stable negotiated settlement with the Taliban and Haqqani Network

No one can ever predict the breaking point in an insurgency, its fragmentation, or the impact of time or changes in leadership. There also are positive signs that significant numbers of insurgents are returning to civil life – although it is far from clear that all are more than “sleepers” or simply waiting for the coming reductions in US and ISAF forces and aid.

It is now clear, however, that the Taliban and its Emirate front are not seriously interested in negotiations that would not offer them either political gains in the war or the prospect of victory without fighting. They are committed to the offensive, and there is no clear prospect of them changing that the US or anyone else can plan for.

If the US wants Transition to work, the time has come to stop giving a false priority to negotiations and to prepare the Afghan power structure, government, and security forces in ways that will allow them to cope with a lasting mix of enemies. If the US wants an exit strategy, it may then try to leave on terms that give the insurgents de facto victory in return for a cosmetic peace settlement, but even this rationale of claiming success and leaving is dubious at best. It is unclear that other Afghan factions will ever accept such a façade, or that the insurgents will feel they would have to compromise to even this degree.

Create realistic transparent, and affordable plans for development of each element of the Afghan security and focus on their combat performance and their problems with divided loyalties and corruption

The key task is no longer simply generating more forces, and there never should have been an emphasis on force quantity over the creation of a sustainable force that could carry out the mission once the US and its allies withdrew. The test of Afghan readiness is not manning, training equipment, and or building facilities; Afghan force performance must be proven in the field by force elements and mission execution.

Planning and funding must focus on how well each element of Afghan forces actually does in defeating/containing insurgents in given districts and areas. The focus should be on the flow of combatants and the struggle for political influence in key areas, rather than national totals by order of battle and using measurements like the CUAT.

Corruption and political or ethnic/sectarian/tribal loyalties need to be assessed and made public enough to limit the misuse of force elements to a reasonable level. It may well be that elements of the ANSF devolve on a regional level if the Afghan central government continues to be as weak or does not survive the coming funding and military cuts during Transition. The key criteria should become denying insurgent victory and control, not ensuring central government control per se.

It may be too early to create more than unrealistic plans to downsize given force elements, or to emphasize given aspects of force quality over force quantity. There do, however, need to be the best possible plans on hand, ones based on credible resources and future rates of progress, and shaped by a clear sense of direction and function in terms of what such forces can actually secure and accomplish during the Transition.

In the process, the development of Afghan National Security forces needs to be made fully transparent at every level. There needs to be a credible plan for each element that focuses on mission effectiveness and affordability. These plans needs to show in detail what is expected at least over the coming five years, and be updated regularly to reflect real world events.

Fiscal accountability must be part of all spending and contracting and tied to clearly defined measures of effectiveness. These must be transparent and public and subject to outside criticism and review, as well as regular audits by SIGAR and the GAO. There must be no major exceptions, and failures to properly execute should end careers from the top down.

A new approach to command is needed in NTM-A and throughout the US/ISAF and successor efforts to transfer responsibility to the Afghan security forces. It is an approach that must fully and transparently communicate progress in a credible and valid form. It is one that needs to be tied to credible levels of financial aid, trainers and partners, and be used to win legislative and public support in the US and allied countries.

As is the case with all other aspects of both military and civil aid, the US Congress and all donor governments should make future funding contingent a number of assurances. Funding should be directly tied to the existence and quality of meaningful plans, honest and effective reporting, and the guarantee of public transparency and integrity during both the time NTM-A and ISAF

remain in existence and after the Afghan government takes over. This should include audited fiscal statements and reviews of contract and professional performance. A black box, “trust me”, approach to reporting is unacceptable.

A sustainable approach to supporting Afghan forces must be based on persuading the US and other nations that a credible effort is possible and worth supporting. It must show there is a workable basis for creating Afghan forces that can actually succeed, and that Afghan forces are moving toward an affordable and sustainable force posture.

Gross abuses of ISAF reporting must cease. These include practices such as counting as present pledged trainers and partners who are not actually present, or counting warm bodies as effective trainers, regardless of experience. The problems in getting adequate manpower need to be honestly and explicitly addressed.

Also to be addressed must be the problems in providing adequate numbers of outside enablers and combat forces through at least 2017. Talking about full Transition by end 2014 is nonsense, and no Afghan force development plan can be complete that does not explicitly address this issue in terms that the US and its allies can credibly resource.

These efforts need to be supported by clear plans for dealing with the inevitable reality of more green-blue casualties, internal tensions, and power struggles within Afghan forces. “Doing it their way” is increasingly going to mean leaving trainers and mentors who are ideal political targets for the Taliban and other insurgents with less protection and outside support.

Above all, the US and its allies should avoid farces like the Chicago conference, setting arbitrary total manning levels, and talking about pledges and total funding levels in terms of a single figure like \$4.1 billion. This kind of facade has no place in effective planning and war fighting.

All of these efforts, however, may still mean the US and its allies have to accept the devolution of a significant amount of power. In many cases, power brokers and local forces may be the only answer in key parts of the country. Key elements of the security forces, especially the police may align themselves with local leaders. If the central government fails in significant parts of the east and south, the Army and others security forces may split into regional centers or become linked to some new form of the Northern Alliance.

This is scarcely the ideal outcome, but it may become the only one that is actually feasible. Like Afghanistan’s future politics and governance, dealing with “Afghanistan as good as it can actually get” may mean accepting the reality of ethnic, sectarian and regional splits and tensions. It almost certainly means having to rely more on local forces – some of which are going to be less than ideal. There will be a price tag to letting the Afghans do it their way, and reform – if it occurs – will then have to come over time from Afghan and not outside efforts.

Accept a Deeply Flawed Afghan Political System But Still Hold it Accountable Where This is Really Critical to Transition

The US, its allies, and other donor states seem bound to relearn the lessons most colonial governments learned after far longer periods of nation-building. Cultures and political systems are remarkably resilient, and while they seldom return to the past, they do quickly change to reflect local values, some elements of tradition, and local power.

Transition cannot be based on the illusion of perfect elections, reliance on the Presidency and Central government, the emergence of some form of Afghan consensus and unity, an end to corruption, an end to power brokers, rigid adherence to a largely foreign draft constitution, or the sudden sharing of money and power effectively with provinces and districts.

“Afghanistan as good as can actually get” is decades away from these goals – if they ever do emerge – and the task now is to get through the 2014 election with some form of credibility and effective leadership, strong provincial leadership, and to ensure leadership in key district that is workable on Afghan terms.

There are areas, however, where the US and its allies will need to make aid and support conditional on Afghan progress, and where it should be clear that Afghan failures will mean an end to outside support. These include:

- A credible plan to hold a 2014 election that is honest enough and open enough to win a reasonable degree of public support. Given the lead times involved, this plan should already have existed and been made public.
- Clear plans to hold the Afghan central government accountable for the more critical reforms that it pledged at Tokyo and in the paper it circulated at Bonn. This should not involve a search for new anti-corruption bodies, more prosecutions and more scapegoats.
- A focused effort on enforcing enough fiscal responsibility and accountability to limit waste and fraud to more reasonable levels, and tie funding flows to actual progress.
- It should be made clear to Karzai and future presidents that outside aid and support to the central government – and to them personally -- will be dependent on keeping effective ministers and provincial/district governors and removing corrupt and ineffective ones.
- As is discussed shortly, immediate reforms are also needed that allow Provinces, key cities, and Districts to control and raise their own funds; strengthen local assemblies, and create more representative government at the regional and local level. The gross over-centralization of power, control of money, and appointment of key officials makes the present constitution and power structure a source of aid and comfort to the insurgency.
- Tolerating moderate levels of corruption and the abuse of power must remain an ongoing reality, but the US, its allies, and donors should publically out grossly corrupt governors, senior commanders, and power brokers and make it clear they will not resume funding until they are gone and stay gone. Control of money, not anti-corruption bodies and prosecution should be the key.
- It should be made clear to Karzai, his successor, and all senior Afghan politicians, that the US commitment to the war is conditional on their performance in key areas vital to the success of Transition. The US and its allies should make it clear that they have an exit strategy for Afghanistan if its leaders fail their people and do not work towards some form of strategic success, and make it clear they will act accordingly. This effort should, however, be narrowly focused only on essential aspects of Transition.

At the same time, if the central government does not succeed, the US and its allies should be prepared to accept major weakening of the central government, and the de facto division of the parts of the country along regional, ethnic, and sectarian lines.

Power brokers and warlords are scarcely desirable, but neither is total collapse or failure at the center. The following points should also be considered:

- It may be too late, but the US should at least try to force sufficient political reform to key provinces and districts. These reforms should be aimed at facilitating elected representation, and enabling localities to raise and control their own funds.
- At least some reform is needed to make the Afghan legislature less of a corrupt and obstructive body.

These steps require a far more focused and better planned and managed effort that is dependent on the understanding that the US and its allies have continuing strategic interests in Afghanistan, but scarcely vital ones or ones they cannot walk away from. It requires the US and its allies to take a hard line when it is functional, and to avoid confrontation when it is not. It requires Afghans to clearly understand that they will be held accountable for their own actions; future successes or failures will be their own.

Create a far more focused effort to improve the quality of central governance, and the strength of Provincial and district governance, while preparing for the reality that a far more divided power structure based on regional, ethnic, and tribal lines may emerge

There are several key areas where the US must work with its allies and more honest and capable Afghans to deal with the present failures in governance. One is to create an effective central Afghan staff for Transition planning that can create credible plans for the future, and make truly credible estimates of expenditures and possible revenues after outside military and aid spending drop to minimal levels. The most important single task for central governance will be to know what money it can raise and what money is actually being spent to help Transition in critical areas.

More broadly, as Transition nears, careful triage is needed to determine what aid efforts can credibly improve governance in Kabul and other areas most critical to a successful Transition. As aid and spending drop, most of the regional and PRT aid effort is withdrawn, and many NGOs depart.

It is far too late to train and place the kind of Afghan civil servants needed at every level. What is needed now is a plan for triage that focuses on training, placing, and supporting key personnel where they are critical to Transition, and doing so by setting standards which allow Afghans to govern their way, using existing methods wherever this does not present major problems.

It is even more critical that US and allied aid efforts be ready and willing to work with Afghan ethnic, sectarian, tribal and regional factions if – as is all too likely – the central government weakens and power devolves back to a mix of central government structures and regional power

bases. Relying on elements in some new form of the Northern Alliance, and local Pashtun power bases may well become the future reality of both Afghan politics and governance, and may often be the best way to check and defeat the Taliban and other insurgents

The US and its allies must also work with Afghans at the national, local, and regional levels to create something approaching an effective justice system based on “Afghanistan as good as it can actually get.” A zero-based review will be needed to create an effective plan that links the formal and informal justice systems – including the availability of judges, lawyers, and detention facilities– to the presence of the ANP and government services.

In the many areas where this mix will be lacking – initially or for some years – there need to be mechanisms to ensure tribal/traditional justice and local police – not the Taliban – will have as much influence as possible.

It is fine to talk about working through the Afghan central government as long as no one takes this too seriously when major problems occur. The time is too short, and the needs involved are too urgent, for generic efforts to try to improve governance. Transition imposes too many risks at the security and economic levels, and where Afghan governance fails, the US and its allies must be prepared to work around such failures without seeking to fix the central or local governments. This takes requires aid workers e to be in place, and ones who can actually manage and administrate.

Create a new international effort to replace the present mix of a hopelessly ineffective UNAMA and uncoordinated national aid teams

The drastic downsizing of military spending and aid efforts requires effective economic analysis and planning, as well as far better fiscal controls and measurements of effectiveness at every level. The failure to move forward in these areas, and the vacuous generalizations and pledges of the Tokyo Conference, must be replaced with measures that actually address the causes of a decade of waste and efforts that have been far less effective than they should have been.

More than a decade into the war, UNAMA remains a hopeless mess that has never issued a meaningful assessment of the international aid effort, much less coordinated it. UNAMA cannot be reformed; it is an international disgrace that makes the UN’s problems in Cambodia and the Balkans seem like successes by comparison. It must be abolished, and replaced by a new body with the leadership and talent capable of handling coordination of aid efforts during Transition. This may well require a high-level independent coordinator.

This may well require a high-level independent coordinator, and it certainly requires public plans, reporting, measures of effectiveness, and accountability. Once again, nothing about the history of outside civil and military aid during the Afghan war indicates that blind trust is a credible substitute for transparency. Effective planning and effective transparency must be tied to full fiscal responsibility in the civil areas as well as security.

Aid must be phased down in ways that reduce funding beyond what can be effectively absorbed. Assessment needs to be explicit and transparent – as do measures of effectiveness. The path to maximizing self-funding and Afghan responsibility must be clear, and USAID, State Department, UN, and other donor personnel in country and in capitals need to have their careers

made dependent on such action from the top down – including the head of USAID and the most senior officials in State.

Creating a stronger Afghan Transition team will not be enough. The Afghan government and donors will need a strong and independent team to do economic analysis and planning that is not subject UN or national politics and control. Having an outside body led by the World Bank that reports independently to the Afghan government, donors, and the UN seems to be a possible solution.

The end of most PRTs -- and sharp cuts in aid personnel and funds -- will create new problems that compound the lack of effective coordination between (and usually within) donor efforts. Some standards need to be set for future national efforts in terms of reporting, planning, contracting, and fiscal accountability – all of which need to be reported to the Afghan government and a new UN body, and not simply to capitals.

Above all, there needs to be a credible plan for reducing the civil presence in the field that does lead to loss of support for regional and district governments as Transition proceeds. Such a plan must focus on the most critical population centers and areas, and coordinate the efforts of the US and remaining outside donors. Going from a failed civilian surge to a successful implosion of the civilian aid effort is a recipe for failure that cannot be blamed on the Afghans.

As for the US, it now needs to come to grips with its own gross institutional failures. The dismal collapse of the QDDR effort has left the US State Department without any clear lines of responsibility for planning, managing, assessing, and exerting fiscal control of aid efforts. USAID has many outstanding personnel in the field but it has been a dismal mess at the top.

Ten years of failure in two wars have shown that the US cannot do effective and integrated planning and management, cannot set valid requirements, cannot control costs and spending, or adequately set priorities and measure its effectiveness. The US history of dealing with aid by creating a series of “golden silos” must come to an end – if only because there will be far less gold.

The short-term solution may be to place an integrated aid effort directly under the NSC, provide full monthly transparency in public reporting to Congress, and create a far stronger Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) whose mission includes review of the entire past, current, and planned effort with the same broad range of activity that took place in the work of the Special Inspector General for Iraqi Reconstruction (SIGIR). The long-term solution is to go back to the QDDR effort and not let bureaucratic infighting and parochialism kill the next attempt at reform.

Accept the reality that the “New Silk Road” and Regional Development may offer hope for a stable and secure Afghanistan after 2020, but offer no practical basis for Transition

The US needs to stop talking about economic miracles and focus on getting the aid necessary to ease the Afghan government and people through the coming cuts in military spending and aid. No credible case exists for the New Silk Road, and it should be dropped from all US policy and planning efforts.

This does not mean that objective mid- and long-term economic development studies and plans are not needed. They should not, however, be contract studies to please given policies. Creating a dedicated section within a World Bank planning effort – tied to some counterpart group in the Afghan government – that is transparent and subject to peer review could prove to be of great value over time and in the period beyond 2015-2017.

“Is This Trip Necessary?” Are the Benefits of The Afghan War Still Worth the Cost?

These options indicate it may still be possible to carry out a workable form of Transition with benefits that are worth the cost. The US and its allies may be able to phase down their forces and expenditures in Afghanistan to far lower levels without having Afghanistan come under insurgent or extremist control – if steadily declining civil and military resources are focused on what is actually possible, rather than what is not.

It is all too clear, however, that there is broader grand strategic question that everyone involved in the Afghan War now needs to ask. Are the benefits of continuing the war for a Transition that will require serious US involvement through 2020 really worth the cost?

The Afghan War is only one element of US global strategy at a time when other needs in Asia and the Middle East – as well as maintaining and modernizing US forces – may have a higher priority. Certainly, if anything like some of the possible budget cuts and sequestration options become real, US global strategy will need to be reworked.

Continued US support for the war must be based on a ruthlessly objective assessment of the risks and cost-benefits. At a minimum, the US should cease to make or imply open-ended commitments to Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the region.

No one involved in the war at any level -- and particularly at the top -- should avoid shifting to an exit strategy because he or she is intellectually or emotionally vested in continuing to support the current conflict. The US military needs to stop embracing the mission. Civilians need to stop overselling the merits of peace negotiations, their particular form of aid, and guarding their bureaucratic roles.

The US should make it clear at the Presidential level that the US commitment to the Afghan war is not open-ended and can be halted at any time. It should be made clear to Afghan leaders and the Afghan people that US efforts are and will remain dependent on Afghan progress and success, and the quality and effectiveness of Afghan leadership. The President should be forthright about the fact that the US will reassess its strategy and commitments on a semi-annual basis.

Making US support for the war conditional on Afghan actions is as much a matter of morality and ethics as self-interest. It is all too clear that the US already lives in a world where it lacks the resources to meet every urgent need. It needs to prioritize to maximize success – not only strategically but also in providing civil and military aid.

Finally, the Administration needs make continuing the war contingent on winning congressional, public, and media support by showing it has credible plans, and honestly communicating the risks, progress, and cost-benefits of continuing the war.

This latter effort means restoring credibility and integrity to every level of reporting, from the command and aid team level in Afghanistan up to the President. Support for the war must be won through transparency, issuing meaningful plans, and an honest portrayal of risks and progress. The country team in Afghanistan needs to stop engaging in spin and lies-by-omission. The Administration should immediately change its public reporting to Congress to make the facts behind its plans, progress, and assessment of the future transparent and public.