THE AFGHAN WAR IN 2013: MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSITION

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Transition poses many challenges. Afghanistan is still at war and will probably be at war long after 2014. At the same time, the coming cuts in ISAF forces and cuts in military and civil aid, along with the country’s fractious politics and insecurity, will interact with a wide range of additional factors that threaten to derail Transition:

- Afghanistan’s internal political dynamics and the weakness and corruption of Afghan governance mixed with growing de facto power of regional and ethnic power brokers.
- The difficulties of making a Transition to a non-Karzai government in 2014, as ethnic, regional, and sectarian power-struggles threaten to dominate elections and further divide the government.
- The difficulties in creating an effective mix of Afghan forces to replace US and other ISAF forces.
- A steady decrease in US and allied resolve to sustain high levels of spending, advising efforts, and partnering after 2014.
- The cumulative political pressure of “incidents” between the US/ISAF and Afghan leadership; the US and Pakistan; border incidents; and “green on blue,” ISAF-on-civilian, and cultural clashes.
- Peace negotiations may re-empower the Taliban and other insurgents through devolution of power to regions and provinces, giving them a form of victory by other means - the Cambodia/Nepal outcome.
- Wealthy and powerful Afghans facing a loss of position in the post-Transition order will rush for the exits, taking currency, investment potential, and know-how along with them.
- Demographic pressures will result in exceedingly high population growth, barring emigration from a serious refugee crisis. These pressures, aided by rural instability, will result in continued rapid growth of urban centers, particularly Kabul.
- Continued insurgent sanctuaries in Pakistan mixed with divisions and radicalization within the Taliban, a rise in Haqqani influence, and political efforts by the Hekmatyar group - creating an insurgent ability to win a battle of political attrition during 2013-2015 and beyond.
- A rise in outside pressure from Pakistan, Iran, India, the other “Stans,” China, and Russia - the “new great game.” While these countries may provide aid in an attempt to increase their own influence, such aid will not be sufficient to meet the Afghan government’s needs. Furthermore, these states’ interests will not always coincide with Afghan and Western interests for the region.
- Transition is becoming increasing less relevant in strategic terms relative to problems in Pakistan, the increase in other forms of civil conflict and religious extremism rising out of the political upheavals in the Arab world, the growing priority for US military resources in the Middle East and particularly Gulf, and/or the rise of new centers of terrorism in movements like Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and Al Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM).

All of these factors highlight the need to make the internal political, governmental, economic, and security dimensions of Transition as effective as possible. This will require a new degree of realism about what the Afghans can and cannot accomplish, about the best approaches to shaping the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and the need for better planned and managed outside aid.

**Who Will Gain Power and Will Afghans Prove Capable of Taking the Lead?**

Much will depend on the future of Afghan politics. The more one looks at Afghanistan today, the more possible it seems that Transition will occur at a time that the 2014 election could produce one of three outcomes: a weak and divided state, a state that either
devolves into regions controlled by power brokers or warlords, or one that comes under at least partial Taliban and extremist control.

More than a decade of Western intervention has not produced a strong and viable central government, an economy that can function without massive outside aid, or effective Afghan security forces. There are few signs that insurgents are being pushed towards defeat or will lose their sanctuaries in Pakistan. Outside aid efforts have generally produced limited benefits, and the World Bank estimates such efforts have reached only a small percentage of Afghans - many of which will not be sustainable once Transition occurs and aid levels are cut.

Yet the combination of Afghan problems and uncertain outside support does not mean that the Taliban and other insurgents will win. The insurgents have been weakened by ISAF and ANSF attacks; they are relatively limited in number and in areas of influence; and they too have many weaknesses, divisions, and problems in winning public support. The end result of the present Transition effort may be an Afghanistan that muddles through, even if it divides along ethnic, sectarian, and tribal lines.

Even a bad election that weakens the authority of the central government would still be a good outcome if it was composed of a mix of national and local power blocs that are able to contain the Taliban and other insurgents. It may be some mixture of a new form of Northern Alliance; the remnants of “Kabulstan,” other Pashtun elements, and outside aid may be able to replace the current regime without ceding power to the insurgents.

What is clear is that much depends on Afghan actions before and after the end of 2014. A detailed analysis of recent US Government, ISAF, and World Bank reporting on the current level of progress in Afghanistan makes it clear that Afghans must do far more to assume responsibility for their own future and make things work on Afghan terms. As a result, the hardest choices have to be made by Afghans. They have to make changes in leadership, governance, economics, and the ANSF to show there is a real incentive for the US and its allies to support and fund a real Transition strategy.

**Uncertain Outside Support and US and Afghan Tensions**

Much also depends on the politics of US, other ISAF states, aid, and donor support for Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) and the ANSF. There has been a steady erosion of outside support for the war - first in Europe and increasingly in the US, where some 60% of Americans no longer see a prospect of victory or any reason to stay.¹

While the US and other ISAF and donor governments talk about enduring efforts, each time the US and its allies have reviewed their Afghan policy since 2010, they have cut

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¹ An ABC poll in March 2013 found that, “Ten years after U.S. airstrikes on Baghdad punctuated the start of the Iraq war, nearly six in 10 Americans say the war was not worth fighting – a judgment shared by majorities steadily since initial success gave way to years of continued conflict…Nearly as many in the latest ABC News/Washington Post poll say the same about the war in Afghanistan. And while criticisms of both wars are down from their peaks, the intensity of sentiment remains high, with strong critics far outweighing strong supporters…These results are dramatically different than they were when the wars began long ago. The war in Iraq, a few weeks after its start on March 20, 2003, was supported by 80 percent of Americans; in Afghanistan, in late 2001, support exceeded 90 percent.” [http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/03/a-decade-on-most-are-critical-of-the-u-s-led-war-in-iraq/](http://abcnews.go.com/blogs/politics/2013/03/a-decade-on-most-are-critical-of-the-u-s-led-war-in-iraq/)
some aspect of their commitments. Moreover, other new uncertainties have arisen - including growing tensions between President Karzai and the US.

Things have not improved in the spring of 2013. US Secretary of Defense Hagel had to cancel a press conference with President Karzai after Karzai accused the US of aligning itself with the Taliban and Pakistan. Karzai has steadily increased the restraints on US air and night operations, has demanded the transfer of detention facilities under US control where it was not clear that key suspects would not be released, and has demanded that US Special Forces leave Warwick Province.\(^2\) It is far from clear that US and Afghan relations will ease before the spring 2014 election and there is no way to determine whether a stronger and more favorable leadership will emerge after (and if) the election is held.

**Shaping Transition Around Limited Military Success**

The good news is that the security situation is improving in some important ways in spite of these problems, and key elements of the ANSF are making progress. The bad news is that plans for new offensives in the East have been largely abandoned, the political climate in the US has moved towards a sharper downsizing of the US commitment after 2014 and towards more rapid cuts in US troop levels and spending between the end of the campaign season in 2013 and the end of 2014.

The period between 2014 and 2020 will involve an ongoing war of political and military attrition between the Afghan government and ANSF and various insurgent factions. It will also be a struggle between regional/ethnic/sectarian factions, 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. This also means 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. A live compromise will be better than a dead ideal.

**The Lack of Reliable Assessments of Security and the Threat**

Putting the security aspects of Transition in perspective is complicated by a lack of effective analysis and meaningful transparency. It is difficult to assess the current security situation in Afghanistan, much less the situation that will emerge through 2014 and beyond.

Past official reporting on the war has been filled with too much spin and too many omissions to make it possible to predict the course of the fighting. Previous US and ISAF reporting has focused on tactical measures like enemy initiated and complex attacks that grossly favor US and allied military forces at a time the insurgents have no reason to concentrate on direct attacks. Rather, insurgents have every reason to seek to expand their

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influence without directly fighting Western troops, attack the Afghan government, use major attacks and tactics like “green on blue” attacks to speed US/ISAF withdrawal, push aid workers and NGOs out, and further weaken already hostile popular support for the war.

Until the US and ISAF honestly and publically assess areas of insurgent control and influence, the full range of insurgent violence, its political intent, impact, and how this compares with areas of Afghan government and ANSF influence and control, their reporting lacks the scope and integrity to be trustworthy or make effective Transition planning possible.

**Holding Most Population Centers and Key Lines of Communication (LoCs)**

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

There is no way to make a firm estimate of how probable this military success will be. No one can predict the quality of Afghan leadership and Transition over the years to come, 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 on spin and deliberate omission of key aspects of the war to the point where reporting has become a de facto liars’ contest.

These are challenges that it may still be possible to meet if Afghans and the US and its allies set reasonable goals and focus on real-world priorities rather than the illusions of the past. Even if many of the current political and security goals are not met, this does not mean that Afghanistan cannot achieve relative stability based on some form of de facto federalism or sharing of power between the central government and given factions.

The various insurgent groups still represent relatively small, unpopular movements with ethnic and sectarian ties that limit their influence in many parts of the country. This may limit insurgent gains as well as mitigate the risk that Afghanistan will become a center of terrorism.

**The Economics of Transition and Civil-Military Aid Will be as Important as Politics and Security Effects**

Developing even minimal security and stability requires Afghan, US, and allied planners to approach economics and the full range of civil and military aid activities in ways that recognize the need for US and allied realism about the need for serious military and civil aid well beyond 2014, and for a continuing commitment to working with the Afghan government.

The coming cuts in military and development spending - which have long driven the growth of Afghanistan’s fragile economy - pose a critical challenge for US, allied, and
donor policy. An updated World Bank analysis of the economic situation in Afghanistan - and the impact of aid - raises the following issues:\(^3\)

- Most GDP growth in recent years has come from agriculture and rainfall, and not from aid or outside spending.
- But, aid and military spending have equaled some 90% of market GDP.
- Aid alone, less military spending, has equaled 40% of GDP.
- 75% - 95% of aid that goes through the GIRoA budget stays in country versus 10-25% for off budget aid.
- But, only 12% of aid to date went through GIRoA versus a future goal where 50% of aid is to be managed and spent by GIRoA in spite of critical budget execution, management and corruption problems.
- Moreover, aid and military spending in Afghanistan has been high enough to vastly exceed absorption capacity, produce immense waste, distort the economy, and do much to corrupt than Afghan society and government.
- While only 6-10% of population has been significantly affected by aid and military spending, this percentage includes the leading civil and security elite. Cuts will affect the government, market business sector, political leaders and power brokers, and civil service. This is the elite that drives security and stability, and spending cuts are already hurting this elite.
- Serious security problems and spending cuts could drive Afghanistan into recession and produce a serious crisis in stability and security.
- Even the 4-6% growth case that would occur with sufficient aid, security, and good rainfall will fall below the level needed for development and stability, and politics could produce negative growth.
- Unemployment (8%) and underemployment (48%) total 56% of the labor force, and the economic is under constant pressure from additions to the work force coming from a very young and rapidly growing population.
- Spending cuts pose a critical problem for critical problem for the budget. Government revenues may be able to rise from 11% of GDP to 27% in 2020-2021 with good governance and security, but Afghanistan will need outside need financing equal to 43% of its GDP through 2020-2021.
- Afghanistan would have to spend 17.5% of GDP on security if the cost is limited to $4.1 billion a year
- A financing gap of 40% of the GDP will exist in 2014-2015. The gaps will still be 25% in 2020-2021 even if mining and other capital investment is high; and security, economic reform, and LOCS come through.
- Key uncertainties exist about the economic status of internally displace persons, the impact of urban population pressures, and infrastructure issues like road repair.
- The agriculture sector faces major challenges from dependence on rainfall, the impact of the narco-economy, and a lack of cold storage, food processing, market access, and transportation. An Afghan official claims 60% of food rots or is lost on the way to market.
- Outside spending cuts will push the agriculture sector towards opium and cannabis, at cost of benefiting crime lords, and creating problems for farmers in terms of load dependence at a time there is acute population pressure on the land.

The Need to Focus on the Afghan War Fatigue

Afghanistan must convince donors that they can work through the central, provincial, and local governments in ways where aid money is actually used to benefit the people and bring economic stability. It must have outside support in focusing on reforming its own economy and reducing government barriers to development.

Regardless of official rhetoric, public opinion polls in the US and most ISAF countries show little support for the war or serious aid spending, and some countries are already cutting aid and reducing their troop levels earlier than planned. Much of the aid effort in the field will be cut from 2013 onwards as ISAF troops depart, and the lead time to implement new or more effective programs in Afghanistan often requires 11 to 18 months to put major changes into action.

There is little time left to set forth a clear program to deal with Transition. There is less than 22 months left before most US and ISAF forces are gone and their military spending in Afghanistan goes with them.

The Need for Credible Economic and Aid Plans, Credible Resources, and Transparency

All of these issues highlight the need for a new approach to the war, and one that highlights the need for credible civil and military spending plans that have a far greater degree of honesty and transparency. So far, there are no credible public plans for either the economic or military aid aspects of Transition.

In spite of the claims of success and token aid pledges that came out of largely symbolic conferences in Chicago and Tokyo, there is no open source evidence that the US and ISAF have really reversed insurgent momentum in Afghanistan or created conditions where tactical victories will have lasting strategic meaning. Possibly more importantly than military victories, 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.

The political and bureaucratic barriers to dealing with these realities are all too clear, but the US, other ISAF countries, donor countries and the Afghan government still need to do what they can to develop detailed plans for the civil and military aspects of Transition that reflect a far more realistic assessment of the Afghan economy, the limits to Afghan civil governance, and the need to fund effective and affordable Afghan national security forces.

These efforts should:

- Create an honest baseline of reporting and trend analysis based on the political nature of the war and net assessment of each side and explicitly address uncertainty and the need for parametric analysis.
- 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.
- Focus on stability during the key period of Transition from 2013 to 2016, and not development. Look at worst-case risks. Address issues like security, corruption, narco-economics and capital flight.
• Make aid “conditional” in ways that are tied to the actual level of progress in Afghan politics, force development, and use of economic aid.

• Work with the ANSF and GIRoA to focus military and aid resources on holding key populated areas while securing those other areas where the Afghan central government and/or key Afghan leaders and factions are strong enough to hold and have sufficient popular support to sustain their position. This will sometimes mean devolving power back to regional and local leaders on their terms - and using then aid and security assistance to support them - when this offers a practical way of providing some form of effective governance and security. It means backing Afghan leaders who are actually effective even if this means “doing it their way,” rather than setting unrealistic standards or backing the central government where it cannot lead or be effective.

• Phase down aid and outside military support during 2015-2018 with careful attention to how Afghan forces actually perform in the field and real-world time schedules for effective action.

• Move towards self-funding in as carefully planned a manner. Rapid cuts will kill the chances of successful development of the ANSF and create economic and political instability. Throwing money at the problem in ways that waste and corrupt, setting goals Afghans don’t want and can’t achieve, losing sight of priorities by focusing on projects rather than national needs, 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 failure.

• Finally, accept the fact that the Afghan insurgency may drag on indefinitely, that it is certain to have de facto control over some parts of the country after 2014, and this is a fact the US, its allies, and aid donors must be prepared to live with.

**Time is Another Key Threat**

There is little time in which to make a credible start in becoming far more realistic about the Afghan economy, the impact of cuts in military and aid spending, and how best to handle the phase-down of aid and military spending while focusing on the limited assets the Afghan government and economy will have after 2014. Time and money cannot continue to be wasted at anything near the current levels.

There are less than two years left before Transition in 2014, and there are no magic bullets that offer rapid growth and prospects for stability before 2020. This means it is necessary to create a meaningful action plan that Congress, the media, area experts, and the American people can debate and commit themselves to supporting no later than Congressional approval of the FY2014 US budget. If President Obama cannot provide such a plan within several months, and then win the support necessary to implement it, any hope of salvaging lasting success in the war will vanish.

Mobilizing US and European support for the war and continued aid and support to Afghanistan is already a critical issue. It is also an issue where success will depend largely on the US. If the US is to have any hope of bringing its European allies along at the required level of effort, it must show them - and Afghanistan and Pakistan - that it has the domestic support to act.

**Planning on the Basis of Economic Realism**

A successful Transition will require both Afghans and donors to take a realistic look at the economic impact of cuts in military and aid spending, Afghanistan’s real-world level of per capita income, gross inequities in economic distribution, and the need for internal economic reform as a substitute for high levels of aid and outside investment.
Regardless of what donor countries have said in the past or say in future conferences, it is nearly certain that the Afghan government cannot obtain the level of aid it requested at the Bonn Conference or the Chicago and Tokyo Conferences, particularly over a period that extends so far beyond 2014.

Many US and European actions have already begun to look like a cover for an exit strategy from Afghanistan. Military spending is already dropping sharply and will drop again in FY2013. Development aid from the US, the largest aid donor, dropped from $3.5 billion in FY2010 to about $2.3 billion in FY2012. Aid to support democracy, governance and civil society dropped by more than 50%, from $231 million to $93 million. Aid for "rule of law" dropped from $43 million to $16 million.

Other countries are cutting their civil and military aid programs, and some NGOs are already eliminating key programs or withdrawing from the country. Unfortunately, the time lag between US appropriations and disbursements - and allied pledges and actual spending - will make the impact of such cuts even worse during Transition. The past increases in appropriations and pledges and the spending impact in Afghanistan of the surge or peak in US forces mean actual disbursements peaked in 2011 and 2012, sharply increasing the problems of coming spending cuts in 2013-2015.

Moreover, the US and other current donors need to avoid trying to turn to other powers as “solutions” for their own unwillingness to spend. Pakistan has no money. Russia, China, and Iran seem remarkably unlikely to support either Afghan government hopes or the US and Europe in funding Transition. The US and its allies need to be more honest about describing conferences as a form of success when only results on the ground actually count. Louise Hancock, Oxfam’s Afghanistan policy officer described the Bonn conference as follows: “It’s been another conference of flowery speeches: big on rhetoric and short on substance.”

Restructure Economic Aid to Reflect the Fact Afghans Will Need Aid for Economic Stability During Transition More Than for Development

Although there are no reliable estimates of the economics of Transition, the “guesstimates” that do exist make it clear that both Afghan military and civil efforts face major funding problems. Studies by the World Bank and Afghan government - and working studies by the IMF, the US, and key European governments - show that “Transition” requires major levels of continuing aid to avoid triggering major security and stability problems. This does not mean, however, that the Afghan government can realistically count on the kind of aid levels it has requested to date.

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President Karzai requested some $10 billion a year through 2025 at the Bonn Conference on November 30, 2011. He requested this aid to fund a program that sets ambitious goals for both security and development, called for equally ambitious reforms and improvements in governance, as well as for the Afghan government to achieve full independence from outside support in 2030.\(^7\)

- By 2015 Afghanistan will have taken over full responsibility for its own security, and will be leading development initiatives and processes with the confidence to make critical foundational investments that will lead to economic growth and fiscal sustainability.

- By 2025 Afghanistan will have eliminated its dependency on international assistance for funding to non-security sectors and will only receive support consistent with all other least developed nations. A robust and growing extractive industries sector will have developed. Through effective development and improved delivery of government services, the root causes of insurgency will be reduced and, in consultation with international partners, plans will have been put in place to reduce the size of the ANSF.

- By 2030 Afghanistan will be funding a professional, highly effective ANSF. Achievements in development and governance will see Afghanistan emerge as a model of a democratic, developing Islamic nation.

The Afghan government stated that meeting its goals would require some $120 billion in aid through 2025. This level of aid, however, is almost certainly too high to be credible, and many of the Afghan promises of reform in governance and to remove the economic barriers to growth and development are extremely unlikely to be kept. At the Tokyo conference in July 2012, international donors pledged less than $4 billion per year through 2016, and it is highly likely that much of this pledged funding would never reach Afghanistan.

**Create an Effective and Coordinated International Effort**

While national tensions has so far crippled any unified UN or other effort to fully coordinate national aid, there is a clear need to create an effective international body to replace UNAMA. Someone needs to help manage the transition from national and NGO aid that is largely spend outside the GIRoA budget and GIRoA control to an effective Afghan planned and managed aid effort.

This body should have a mandate that gives it real power to work with the Afghan government and key Afghan factions at the regional and local levels to actually coordinate development planning and spending, and find ways to ensure it actually reaches the Afghan people and meets their needs.

The weaknesses and corruption in the Afghan central government are not fixable before 2014 or in the medium term thereafter. Cutbacks in PRTs, NGO presence, and aid staffs will further complicate the problem. The money that remains cannot be effective if it continues to be spent on a donor nation-by-donor nation, NGO-by-NGO, and compartmentalized into military and civilian basis. There is a desperate need for coordination, reform, and for someone and some organization to be in charge of the overall planning and management for the aid effort. There is a desperate need for

\(^7\) The details were provided in a separate paper circulated in addition to the President’s statement entitled, *Towards a Self-Sustaining Afghanistan, An Economic Transition Strategy*. It was issued by the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and dated November 29, 2011.
expanding the realism and depth of the World Bank effort and for creating a UN body that can actually do its task.

The obvious need is to either reform or abolish UNAMA in its current state, create a UN body that can actually do the job or give the World Bank a major role in the field, and use international conferences to get donor states to both coordinate aid and spending and regulate NGOs.

An effort to coordinate aid was made at the Tokyo conference. It does not take much vision or many visits to Afghanistan, however, to predict that no real coordination will take place, that UNAMA will continue to be a dysfunctional mess, and that even the US internal effort will remain a poorly planned and coordinated mix of “golden silos” where the talk of integrated civil-military efforts never goes beyond concepts to reality.

**Shift Governance Aid to Deal with the Realities of a Flawed Afghan Political System but Hold the Afghan Government Accountable Where This is Critical to Transition**

Goverance aid will need major restructuring. The US, its allies, and other donor states seem bound to ignore 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.

Transition must focus on “Afghanistan as good as can actually get,” and this Afghanistan 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 national leadership, strong provincial leadership, and ensuring leadership in key districts 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 would mean an end to outside support. These include credible plans 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 have already existed and been made public.
- 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.
- Create 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.
- Make it 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.

- Press for enough reform 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.

- Make it equally 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 correct and ineffective ones.

- It may be too late, but the US should at least press for sufficient political reform to produce stability and security in key provinces and districts. These reforms should be aimed at facilitating elected representation, and enabling localities to raise and control their own funds.

- Push for reforms 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 levels. 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 these figures are gone and stay gone. Control of money, not anti-corruption bodies and prosecution, should be the key.

At the same time, if the central government does not succeed, the US and its allies should be prepared to accept a major weakening of the central government and support 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 a total collapse or failure at the center.

**Accept the Reality that the “New Silk Road” and Regional Development May Benefit Afghanistan after 2020, but Offer No Practical Basis of Support for Transition**

The fifth step is for the US 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. As World Bank studies in early 2013 make all too clear, no credible case exists for the New Silk Road or major revenues from mining until 2021 or beyond. As such, they 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 especially in the period beyond 2015-2017.

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Prepare to Shift Economic Aid from Development to Stability

The sixth step, and perhaps the most important for the period between 2014 and 2017, is to prepare to shift economic aid away from development projects and to help Afghanistan achieve economic stability if the cuts in military spending and overall aid trigger a serious recession, create problems in popular support for the government, or affect the elite (that has benefited from aid and spending and that effectively lead the country and represents its armed elite).

The data on the economy, military spending, and the impact of aid are so bad that it is not possible to predict the impact of coming cuts – a problem compounded by the inability to predict how serious these cuts will be and how much of a backlog of existing unspent aid will actually being spent in country over the next few years. The risks involved, however, are too great to ignore.

Far more realistic risk analysis is need almost immediately and must then continue throughout the next half decade. Scenarios need to include the full range of problems and risks. Plans need be created to rapidly shift funding to meet urgent employment and economic stability needs. Simply hoping or assuming no crisis will occur is not a meaningful form of planning.

Create Realistic, Transparent, and Affordable Plans for the Afghan Security Forces

The problems involved in shaping and funding the complex mix of Afghan army, regular police, local police forces, militias, and contract or APPF security forces would be less important if they did not coincide so directly with efforts to create a broad transition to ANSF security operations far more quickly than previously planned. The fact is, however, that the transition to reliance on Afghan forces now has to be much quicker than US, ISAF, and NTM-A planners counted on even a year ago, and deal with the reality that there is declining support for outside force deployments and funding.

Make Transparency Real

One key step is to make the actual level of real world progress in the ANSF far more transparent and show that there really is a credible set of plans the can be supported with real world levels of resources. One key task is to focus on a net assessment of the ANSF’s military and political capability to actually achieve some form of “victory.”

These efforts should focus on the fact that the key task in ANSF development is not to generate more forces, but to generate more effective forces. Moreover, Afghan forces should not be rated on success in meeting manning, training, and equipment goals and/or building facilities.

ANSF planning and funding must focus on how well each element of the 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 on national totals by order of battle or using measurements like the Commander’s Unit Assessment Tool (CUAT).

This means corruption and political or ethnic/sectarian/tribal loyalties need to be honestly assessed and made public enough to limit the misuse of force elements to a reasonable
level. It also means accepting the risk that elements of the ANSF may devolve on a regional or local 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.

**The Real World ANSF that Emerges from Transition Will be Far Different from Today’s Force and Manpower Goals**

Afghans, and the US and its allies, need to accept the fact that the ANSF will be driven by pressures that mean major changes in its structure and force goals are inevitable as Transition occurs. These pressures include:

- A failure to meet initial US and ISAF military surge goals, implement the 2010 campaign plan, and back the US build-up with a viable civilian surge.
- Major shortfalls in providing the levels of Afghan governance and rule of law efforts in the field necessary to make ANSF efforts effective.
- The inability of the Afghan government to treat the real-world impact of power brokers, corruption, narcotics, and criminal networks around and within the ANSF and to treat these problems as if they did not exist.
- The long history of underfunding and erratic funding by outside states and shortfalls in trainers and partners.
- Long periods in which salaries were not competitive and high levels of annual attrition and turnover took place.
- Steady rises in ANSF force goals based largely on arbitrary numbers and force goals accompanied by steady efforts to reduce the time available to achieve them.
- Ongoing reductions in US and allied force levels, often with limited warning and which are larger and sooner than previously anticipated.
- Reductions in estimates of the annual cost of the ANSF from some $9 billion to $6 billion to $4.1 billion.
- Constant changes in performance standards and goals.

**Measure Effectiveness on the Basis of Net Assessment of Performance Relative to the Threat**

Creating an effective ANSF requires a new approach to assessing the development of Afghan forces that is centered on a conditions-based net assessment of how given elements of the ANSF actually perform relative to insurgent factions as well as tied to a similar assessment of the relative success of the Afghan government, insurgents, power brokers, and other factions in winning support in given areas.

Such assessments must focus on which elements of the ANSF prove to be most effective as Transition occurs as well as their performance in the field. The key test of success from this campaign season onwards will be how key elements of the ANSF actually perform, what level of leadership and unity exists within the Afghan government, who wins public support in key provinces and districts, what level of resources are really required for valuable force elements, and what level of resources are actually available.
Create a Layered Defense that makes the most Effective Use of the ANA, AAF, ANCOPS, and Other Elite Elements of the ANP

Plans, force development efforts, and future plans should be based on separately assessing each element of the ANSF. Training, aid, and Afghan resources must be concentrated on building up the force elements that can actually perform effectively in the field. It is both meaningless and actively misleading to focus on the total manning and size of the ANSF, rather than assess it by service.

- The key elements of the force now include large parts of the Afghan National Army (ANA), which has a current force goal of some 172,000 - or some 49% of the present total manpower goal. The key issue for the success of the entire ANSF will be the performance of the ANA’s seven corps in the field, the level of threat involved, the capability to sustain and support these forces, and their future cost relative to future resources.

- Another key element will be the ability to build up a meaningful Afghan Air Force during 2014-2017, in which the present manpower goal is only 7,639 men or 2% of the 352,000-man force. However, actual air capabilities in terms of combat sustainable aircraft will be a critical factor in the development of the force.

- A third key element will be the Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP), which has a present manpower goal of 14,451 or only 4% of the 352,000, but which is one the few fully effective paramilitary elements of the ANP. The same will be true of police equivalents of Special Forces and security detachments, and the paramilitary elements of the National Directorate of Security (NDS).

- The Afghan Uniform Police (AUP) and Afghan Border Police (ABP) should be supported, but support should be conditional and focused on effective units, ones that operate with suitable levels of integrity and central government control, and prove effective in the field. It should be conditional on effective Afghan national leadership and management by the Ministry of the Interior (MoI).

The Role of the Afghan Local Police

The future capability in given areas of the best elements of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) and the militias that support the government - some 30,000-40,000 men - will do much to determine the government’s ability to hold key rural areas and who are not included in the debate over total manning numbers like 352,000 or 228,500, which involves a theoretical discussion over how to reduce the entire ANSF in the future long before the need for a given force becomes clear.

It is already clear that the creation of the ALP is seen as a major threat by the Taliban, and provides a critical local layer of defense that stays in threatened areas, that is highly motivated to secure these areas, that have limited cost, and can be tied to the central government through the MoI to the extent the central government can win popular support.

At the same time, the ALP’s future is still uncertain. It presents many problems in terms of potential abuses of local power. It is unclear how well it will hold together when US and Afghan SOF and other trainers leave ALP units. The ANA and ANP have mixed reactions to the ALP, and there have been serious problems when corrupt or ineffective District Chiefs of Police (DCOPS) have failed to work with the ALP. But it should be stressed that some form of local forces will be critical and the abuses that some elements of the ALP may create must be compared to the real world abuses of the ANP and GIRoA officials in many areas. Comparing the problems in the ALP to an idealized ANP
and GIRoA structure that does not and will not exist is not a meaningful basis for real world planning.

**Other Elements of the ANP Will Have Marginal Effectiveness, Remain Corrupt, Lack Adequate Support from Civil Governance, and the Other Elements of a Justice System, and be Tied to Local Power Brokers**

The other elements of the Afghan National Police (ANP) - such as the Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP) and the Afghan Border Police (ABP) - do include some highly effective units and many others that have some utility. However, many of these forces, which make up some 45% of the 352,000 total, will remain corrupt, have limited effectiveness, and lack support from effective governance in the field and from the other elements of a criminal justice system.

Barring far stronger Afghan leadership than now seems likely to emerge in 2014, many elements of the ANP may also revert to control by local power brokers or the highest bidder and much or most of the present NTM-A effort and goals will be replaced with Afghan solutions that allow the AUP and ABP to revert to forces shaped by Afghan resources and standards and that have limited effectiveness.

NTM-A and its successor should continue to try to develop the best force they can, but there should be no illusions. Most of the ANP will needs to be dealt with using an order of battle approach that make the best use of the best elements of the AUP and ABP and finds some place to locate the rest where they can do some good or the least harm.

**Continued US and Allied Support for the Key Elements of the ANSF Will be Needed Through 2018**

The US and its allies need to recognize that many elements of even the ANA will not be fully ready for transition before 2016-2017, and that - if combat continues - they will require the support of outside of airpower, trainers, intelligence, and sustainment.

At present, this seems likely to require a minimum of some 10,000 US forces and some 2,000-2,500 allied forces to provide the full ranges of enabling and supporting services that are needed, a “four corner” training and partnering presence that can cover every major threatened area at least the corps level, and support in areas like airpower, medevac, intelligence, combat emergencies, and correcting for key problems in logistics and support. Afghan forces that have been rushed into being will need conditions-based support based on merit and not arbitrary outside manning and funding.

**Conditions-Based Support for the ANSF**

At the same time, “Conditions-based” support does not mean open-ended support for the ANSF more than it does for the Afghan civil government or economy. No one outside Afghanistan owes Afghanistan support if the government fails to earn it. At present, the lack of leadership, reliance on power brokering, and corruption in both the ANSF and on the civil side of Afghanistan are as much a threat as the insurgents.

If the Afghans cannot find a successful leader in 2014, produce a reasonable degree of unity and governance, reduce corruption and power brokering to more acceptable levels, and show they can make the ANSF effective, that US and its allies should react to these
facts based on the reality that they have higher strategic priorities than Afghanistan and central Asia.

The US should be honest in privately communicating to Afghan officials that it already has many incentives to leave Afghanistan and use its resources elsewhere. Moreover, it should remind them that the US has already shown it can largely walk away from Iraq - a country with far more strategic importance than Afghanistan, that it has many higher-priority strategic priorities throughout the world, and that it has increasingly-constrained resources with which to meet them.

The US and its allies should make it politely but firmly clear that,

- US and other allied strategic interest in Afghanistan are limited, there are many other priorities, and the US and other state can and will leave if Afghans fail to help themselves.
- Afghanistan must demonstrate it has an effective enough president and structure of governance after the 2014 election to earn US and allied support, or see aid and support cut or shifted in part to regional centers of power.
- Corruption and power brokering needs to be sharply reduced and far more emphasis needs to be placed on effective governance.
- The pledges the Afghan government made for reform at the Tokyo conference actually need to be kept.
- Aid will be cut or not go through GIRoA if GIRoA cannot use it effectively and with reasonable levels of integrity.
- The military aid, advisory, and enabling effort will be dependent on Afghan’s action and agreement to an effective Bilateral Security Agreement and implementation of a broader Strategic Partnership.
- Grossly corrupt officials and officers that threaten Afghan security and stability during Transition will not be tolerated after the 2014 election, and aid will be halted or reduced to force such changes.

In the case of the ANSF, the US and its allies should make it clear that they are prepared to cut support and funding for force elements that remain grossly corrupt and serve power brokers in ways that do not provide stability or assist the people. If the effort to create “Afghan good enough” results in failed Afghan leadership, governance, or ANSF development, the US and its allies should regard an exit from Afghanistan as mandatory.

The Underlying Need to Debate Staying in Afghanistan

At the same time, the US and its allies need to examine their reasons for staying Afghanistan, and understand that they cannot succeed with half measures or on the cheap. Sometimes hard decisions have to be made on the basis of “how much is too little?” rather than on the basis of “how much is too much?” If the US is to pay these costs, the US needs an honest and open debate about the need to make this level of effort, and deploy adequate forces.

The US needs to debate the realities of staying in Afghanistan on a meaningful basis. In the process, the US needs to recognize the reality that “Afghan good enough” will often be “Afghan bad enough.” Conditionality does not mean that America and its allies do not have to be ready to live with the fact the best foreseeable Afghanistan will still be a nation with significant level of corruption and many Afghan leaders will fail to meet the
standards of American political correctness. It means living with Afghan internal struggles over political sensitive issues like women’s rights, secular reform, and education.

In balance, there currently seems to be a case for properly resourcing a continuing effort. But the US needs to forge some kind of lasting consensus about providing such support if the Afghans do their part. This means US needs to honestly assess benefits, costs, risks, and conditionality in a public forum in a way that focuses on the future rather than the present or past sunk costs and mistakes. If the US is to stay the course, there must be enough continuing transparency to show that progress is real enough to matter, that the prospects of further success continue to be worth the cost, and the US is making the right commitment - rather than either wasting blood and money or taking a cheap and politically convenient route to the exit.