The Obama Strategy in Afghanistan: Finding a Way to Win

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When President Obama issued yet another statement on Afghanistan on July 6th, and once again delayed his plans to cut the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, he took actions that had already become almost inevitable. Even though he had announced his plan to cut U.S. troop levels to 5,500 by the end of 2016 less than a month earlier, a level of only 5,500 troops risked critically weakening Afghan forces and possibly losing the war. Keeping the level at 8,400, however, was at best a half measure in meeting Afghanistan’s real needs and probably not even that.

The United States needs a far more serious review of its strategy in Afghanistan. It needs one that stops focusing on deadlines and total troop levels, and one that focuses on what it takes to deal with the facts on the ground in Afghanistan and actually win. It needs a strategy that can build sustained public and Congressional support, and provide a proper legacy for the next president. It needs a strategy that can at least try to avoid making Afghanistan an unnecessary pawn in the bitter presidential campaign to come and to give the Afghans a clear incentive to make critical reforms.

It is one of the many ironies of the current Presidential campaign that the United States is now involved in four wars: Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Three of these wars—Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria—involve serious U.S. military commitments that began in 2001, 2003, and 2014 respectively, and will clearly last far beyond the end of the Obama Administration.

Yet, none have been the subject of any serious discussion or debate by either Clinton or Trump. Each war continues without a full discussion or debate over the strategic goals the United States
has in fighting such wars and how they can be ended. The U.S. focus in both Iraq and Syria has been on defeating ISIS with no clear picture for what either state should become, what will happen to its divided sectarian and ethnic factions, how Iranian and Russian influence can be limited, how they will interact with their other neighbors, or what will emerge in terms of terrorism or extremism once ISIS is driven out of its “caliphate” and dispersed.

A U.S. Strategy of “Creeping Decrementalism”

Afghanistan has not been forgotten. President Obama has taken enough action to delay and modify his previous plans for drastic cuts in U.S. military support and manning levels. The Afghan War has, however, become a war that doesn’t even rate a mention on the list of “Top Issues” on the Department of Defense’s (DoD) website.

It is also a war that seems be in steady decline as an American priority. The fighting in Iraq and Syria has led the Obama Administration to slowly increase its military efforts in a form of “creeping incrementalism.” This has resulted in a major air campaign and in slow increases in the U.S. combat role on the ground and in the total number of enablers, trainers, and assisters.

In contrast, the U.S. role in the war in Afghanistan has become a form of “creeping decrementalism,” although President Obama has repeatedly delayed a withdrawal of all U.S. forces. One such delay came on June 10, 2016—when the White House provided the following data on background, and it forms a critical preface to the President’s new statement on July 6, 2016:

The United States continues to undertake two narrow missions in Afghanistan. First, the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) have transitioned to a non-combat mission of training, advising, and assisting the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). Second, the United States maintains a counterterrorism capability in Afghanistan to continue to target the remnants of al-Qa’ida, ISIL-K, and other terrorist groups in the region, and prevent an al-Qa’ida resurgence or external plotting against U.S. targets or the homeland.

The President decided in October 2015 to maintain the current posture of 9,800 troops in Afghanistan through most of this year-2016. In addition, he has decided that, instead of going down to a normal embassy presence in Kabul by the end of 2016, we will maintain 5,500 troops at a small number bases, including at Bagram, Jalalabad in the east, and Kandahar in the south.

An Ambiguous Escape Clause for Either a Continued U.S. Role, or Cutting Down to 5,500 and More

This White House backgrounder did leave the President an out for yet another delay in the cuts in the U.S. role, as well as for involving more of the Americans who stayed in Afghanistan to play a role in combat—although without actually calling it combat:

The President expects that his military commanders at all levels will provide their best military advice, and has remained open to recommendations from his military commanders and members of his national security team regarding possible modifications of the U.S. military role in order to best execute our mission in Afghanistan, protect our forces, and address evolving threats. Any potential consideration would balance adjustments to how we currently execute our mission with our efforts to continue to develop the capabilities of the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF).

In response to such recommendations, and as a reflection of our determination to more effectively support the ANDSF, President Obama has decided to authorize additional authorities for the Department of Defense to be exercised within our two narrow, ongoing mission-sets in Afghanistan.

Specifically, the additional flexibility will offer greater opportunities for U.S. forces to accompany and enable Afghan conventional forces - both on the ground and in the air - as we have already been doing with Afghan special operations forces. In doing so, the U.S. forces will more proactively support Afghan conventional
forces in two critical ways: one, with more American support, especially through close air support; and two, by accompanying and advising Afghan conventional forces on the ground and in the air. This added flexibility is fully supported by the Afghan government, and will help the Afghans at an important moment for the country.

We will continue to work closely with President Ghani, the Afghan government, and our international partners to ensure that Afghan forces have the capabilities and training necessary to preserve the gains made by the Afghans and the international community over the last 14 years.

Still on background, would also note this is not a new mission. These new, limited authorities are modifications of our ongoing Train, Advise, and Assist mission that we believe will allow us to better support the ANDSF, maintain our counterterrorism mission, and protect our forces. This does not mean a blanket order to target the Taliban.

These words gave the President a good excuse if he again failed to cut a nominal strength of 9,800 U.S. troops to 5,500 before the year ended. It was also so ambiguous that he could alter the level of U.S. airpower, Special Forces, and “enablers” deployed so far forward with Afghan forces that they are—to all practical purposes—in combat.

At the same time, they still left the President enough latitude to make further cuts in U.S. military support, making Afghanistan the equivalent of a “poison chalice” for his successor—a war lost through inadequate U.S. support before the new President takes office. This would—to paraphrase T.S. Elliot—the could still end the war with a whimper, rather than a bang.

The Obama Administration’s Version of “Transparency” Makes War a “Fog of Spin”

None of these decisions came out of the blue or without consulting senior U.S. commanders. The president made the decisions set forth in both the June 10th White House background statement, and his reversal of part of that statement on July 6th, after General John Campbell, the previous commander in Afghanistan, had already made it clear in February 2016 that Afghanistan was not capable of defending itself without continued U.S. military support. The president also acted after General John Nicholson, the new commander, conducted a review in the spring of 2016 that called for a continued U.S. presence.

Secretary of Defense Ash Carter supported the decision to keep forces in Afghanistan on June 15th, when he stated at a press conference that he and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs supported such recommendations.

U.S. forces in Afghanistan now will be able to boost support for Afghan conventional forces with more firepower and by accompanying and advising them on the ground and in the air, Defense Secretary Ash Carter said this morning in Brussels...The secretary spoke during a news conference after this week’s NATO defense ministers conference, his fourth as defense secretary and the last such meeting before the July 8-9 NATO summit in Warsaw, Poland.

Based on his recommendations and those of Marine Corps Gen. Joe Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Carter said, President Barack Obama decided to grant more flexibility to U.S. forces in Afghanistan this year.

More Proactive Support

The new authority means U.S. troops can more proactively support Afghan conventional forces in two critical ways: with more American firepower, especially through close air support, and by accompanying and advising Afghan conventional forces on the ground and in the air, he explained. “In practical terms, this means U.S. forces will have more opportunities to accompany and enable Afghan conventional forces, just like we have already been doing with Afghan special operations forces,” the secretary said.
Enabling Capabilities

“As I told my fellow defense ministers,” Carter added, “this supports our ongoing counterterrorism and force-protection missions there [and] NATO's Resolute Support mission… because a more capable Afghan force only makes our [deployed] forces … more secure, and it will help the Afghans … as we prepare for the U.S. and NATO missions in 2017.” Carter said U.S. defense budget planning includes full funding for Afghan national defense and security forces through 2020, and that he learned today from NATO counterparts that they also intend to provide funding through 2020 for the Afghan national security

None of the detailed assessments behind any of the president’s, the White House’s, or the Secretary’s statements or decisions, however, were made public—including any meaningful assessment of the combat situation in Afghanistan, its deteriorating political structure and quality of governance, the impact of gross corruption and failed reform, and what the World Bank has repeatedly warned is a growing economic crisis.

The June review came and went without the White House providing any serious transparency as to the details of the analysis that led to the President’s decision, the probable real world ability to reduce the U.S. troop presence versus the need to increase it, the size of the U.S. air support that would be required, or the size of the U.S. forces needed.

The White House and the President did not provide any transparency as to the size of what it called “a non-combat mission of training, advising, and assisting the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF),” and the mission needed to maintain a “counterterrorism capability” that actually often entails direct combat. Strikingly, a usually noisy and partisan Congress chose to ignore this lack of detail, as did virtually all of the media, and most think tank coverage.

The Department of Defense did little better, although it at least provided some added details in the July edition of its semi-annual report on the Afghan conflict, called Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan, in early July 2016. The State Department and USAID continued to avoid any mention of their goals and operations in the civil side of the war and most of the problems in Afghan politics, governance, and the economy.

What passed for a summary of U.S. strategy in the DoD semi-annual report, however, was little more than a summary of vague U.S. goals, coupled to the hope that the Taliban would seriously negotiate an acceptable peace and somehow cease to be the Taliban—along with every other important insurgent element.

The U.S. strategy in Afghanistan remains centered on working with NATO Allies, operational partners, and the international community to provide financial and advisory support to the Afghan government to enable a well-trained, equipped, and sustainable ANDSF to provide security in Afghanistan; and continuing efforts to defeat the remnants of core al Qaeda and disrupt other extremist groups to ensure Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorist groups to plan and execute attacks against the United States, U.S. persons overseas, or allies and partners.

The U.S. and Afghan governments agree that the best way to ensure lasting peace and security in Afghanistan is reconciliation and a political settlement with the Taliban. The United States continues to support an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned reconciliation process as the surest path to peace in Afghanistan and supports any process that will include violent extremist groups putting down their weapons. The success of an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process will require the Taliban and other armed opposition groups to end violence, break ties with international terrorist groups, and accept Afghan constitutional safeguards for women and ethnic minorities. As the Afghan government works toward this end, developing ANDSF capabilities, improving MoD and MoI capacity, and supporting Afghan leadership are critical to enabling the Afghan government to secure the country against a persistent insurgent threat.
Similarly, the closest the DoD report came to actually “looking ahead” was equally vague and anodyne: 6

As the ANDSF continue to take on the significant challenge of a robust counterinsurgency against the Taliban and counterterrorism efforts against extremist groups, they do so in a dynamic threat environment that requires a strong partnership with the United States and coalition partners in conjunction with sustained security assistance funding from the international community. With the help of the coalition, the MoD and the MoI are integrating lessons learned from 2015 and continuously improving their systems and processes to support the ANDSF. Early indications of the ANDSF’s ability to maintain security and stability during the traditional spring and summer fighting season are positive, but it remains to be seen whether this positive momentum can be sustained. The United States and its NATO Allies and operational partners remain committed to their partnership with the Afghan government and will continue to support the Afghan people as the United States pursues its national security interests in regional stability and counterterrorism objectives with the ultimate goal of a sovereign, secure, stable, and unified Afghanistan.

It is important to note that the contents of the DoD report—and other recent DoD attempts to report on the war—have been steadily cut back over time. Virtually all of the potentially embarrassing metrics on the fighting, governance, and development are gone. There no longer is any discussion of the civilian side of the war—which is at least half of every counterinsurgency conflict. Most of the detail on the actual readiness of Afghan forces and their combat capability is gone. There are no details on the U.S. role in air or land combat, or the number of U.S. advisors deployed forward and directly enabling Afghan combat forces.

The one remaining combat metric that was still in the DoD report were two largely meaningless charts on “Enemy Initiated Attacks”—which ignored UN and other reporting on the rise in casualties and injured and the steady expansion of insurgents in existing and new areas. 7 Yet, as the text of the DoD report made all too clear, the risk level in Afghanistan had become extremely high, 8

The security situation in Afghanistan continues to be dominated by a resilient insurgency; however, in their second year with full security responsibility for their country with limited U.S. and coalition support, Afghan forces have proved their determination, willingness, and ability to make the necessary adjustments to improve in their fight against the Taliban-led insurgency. The Afghan government retains control of Kabul, major transit routes, provincial capitals, and a vast majority of district centers, while the Taliban continue to contest district centers in Helmand and in various provinces in the east and southwest.

The ANDSF are generally capable and effective at protecting the major population centers, preventing the Taliban from maintaining control for a prolonged period of time, and responding to Taliban attacks. At the same time, the Taliban have proven capable of taking rural areas, returning to areas after the ANDSF have cleared but not maintained a holding presence, and conducting HPAs and attacks that undermine public confidence in the Afghan government’s ability to provide security. As a result of the higher operational tempo during the winter months and the increase in violence during the early part of the traditional spring and summer fighting season, both the ANDSF and the Taliban continued to sustain a high number of casualties this reporting period.

..Although the number of HPAs in Kabul and across Afghanistan has decreased in comparison to the last two years, the number of both ANDSF and civilian casualties caused by HPAs has increased. This demonstrates the increased lethality of insurgent attacks – person-borne and suicide vehicle-borne IED attacks in particular – as well as a transition towards an increasingly urban conflict. These increasingly lethal HPAs underscore the importance of HPAs to the insurgency’s ability to sway public opinion regarding the Afghan government’s ability to secure the population.

The violence and high casualty rate for all parties to the conflict in Helmand Province continued throughout this reporting period. In addition, beyond the traditional levels of violence in the south and west of the country, there was an increase in fighting east of Kabul. For example, during February and March 2016 the ANA 201st Corps experienced its highest number of enemy-initiated attacks24 since September 2014, while the
ANA 111th Capital Division also experienced a higher number of attacks than the previous reporting period and when compared to the same time period in 2015.

The continued violence during the winter of 2015-2016 and the early part of the traditional fighting season in 2016 was reflected in public perceptions of security as well. Perceptions of security remain near all-time lows. Twenty percent of Afghans say that security in their community is good. This is down from 39 percent during this time last year...Forty-two percent of Afghans say that security is worse now than during the time of the Taliban. This historically high percentage is a continuation of a trend from last reporting period.

The DoD report did not analyze or map the patterns in insurgent influence and control: a critical political dimension in any insurgency—or the level of effective government control versus power broker and insurgent influence and control—which is even more critical. It skims over the problems of corruption, desertions/absentees, and effective management of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior.

The State and USAID portions of the text that were included in earlier versions of the DoD report had largely vanished. Only token mention was now made of the need for civil reform at the very end of the DoD report, there is no serious discussion of the political crisis in Afghanistan and the potential crisis that could occur between Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah in September 2016. It did not address the critical problems with civil corruption, power brokers, growing dependence on a narco-economy, government fund raising problems, and a growing economic crisis.

At the same time, no public official analysis has ever been provided of the role of Pakistan and its Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) in supporting the Taliban and Haqqani network. Further, previous DoD reports have steadily abandoned any effort to describe future trends, the projected future role of the U.S. beyond training and paying for Afghan forces, and U.S. tactical and strategic goals for the future.

**The President’s Statement on July 7, 2016: Keeping U.S. troop levels at 8,400**

The July 7th statement came less than a month after his previous statement and the new DoD report—and just before a key NATO meeting that would focus on the role of the alliance in Afghanistan. He made it clear that that he had decided to reverse his earlier decision to cut U.S. troop levels to 5,500 by the end of 2016, and that the new total would now be 8,400—much closer to the 9,800 figure. He did not, however, provide any explanation of what the 8,400 would do that was different or why he had now chosen the 8,400 number.

Once the rhetoric is stripped away to expose the substance, the key portions of the President’s July 6th statement were strikingly similar to the background briefing issued on June 10th except for the 8,400 total, a new emphasis on the importance of allied forces, and a reference to the legacy he would leave his successor:

...a year and a half ago -- in December 2014 -- America’s combat mission in Afghanistan came to a responsible end. Compared to the 100,000 troops we once had there, today, fewer than 10,000 remain. And compared to their previous mission -- helping to lead the fight -- our forces are now focused on two narrow missions: training and advising Afghan forces, and supporting counterterrorist operations against the remnants of al Qaida as well as other terrorist groups, including ISIL. In short, even as we’ve maintained a relentless case against those who are threatening us, we are no longer engaged in a major ground war in Afghanistan.

But even these narrow missions continue to be dangerous. Over the past year and a half, 38 Americans -- military and civilian -- have lost their lives in Afghanistan on behalf of our security. And we honor their
sacrifice. We stand with their families in their grief and in their pride. And we resolve to carry on the mission for which they gave their last full measure of devotion.

This is also not America’s mission alone. In Afghanistan, we’re joined by 41 allies and partners -- a coalition that contributes more than 6,000 troops of their own. We have a partner in the Afghan government and the Afghan people, who support a long-term strategic partnership with the United States. And, in fact, Afghans continue to step up. For the second year now, Afghan forces are fully responsible for their own security. Every day, nearly 320,000 Afghan soldiers and police are serving and fighting, and many are giving their lives to defend their country.

To their credit -- and in the face of a continued Taliban insurgency and terrorist networks -- Afghan forces remain in control of all the major population centers, provincial capitals, major transit routes and most district centers. Afghan forces have beaten back attacks and they’ve pushed the Taliban out of some areas. Meanwhile, in another milestone, we recently removed the leader of the Taliban, Akhtar Mohammad Mansur.

Nevertheless, the security situation in Afghanistan remains precarious. Even as they improve, Afghan security forces are still not as strong as they need to be. With our help, they’re still working to improve critical capabilities such as intelligence, logistics, aviation and command and control. At the same time, the Taliban remains a threat. They have gained ground in some cases. They’ve continued attacks and suicide bombings, including in Kabul. Because the Taliban deliberately target innocent civilians, more Afghan men, women and children are dying. And often overlooked in the global refugee crisis, millions of Afghans have fled their homes and many have been fleeing their country.

Now, as President and Commander-in-Chief, I’ve made it clear that I will not allow Afghanistan to be used as safe haven for terrorists to attack our nation again. That’s why I constantly review our strategy with my national security team, including our commanders in Afghanistan. In all these reviews, we’re guided by the facts, what’s happening on the ground, to determine what’s working and what needs to be changed. And that’s why, at times, I’ve made adjustments -- for example, by slowing the drawdown of our forces and, more recently, by giving U.S. forces more flexibility to support Afghan forces on the ground and in the air. And I strongly believe that it is in our national security interest -- especially after all the blood and treasure we’ve invested in Afghanistan over the years -- that we give our Afghan partners the very best opportunity to succeed.

Upon taking command of coalition forces this spring, General Nicholson conducted a review of the security situation in Afghanistan and our military posture. It was good to get a fresh set of eyes. And based on the recommendation of General Nicholson, as well as Secretary Carter and Chairman Dunford, and following extensive consultations with my national security team, as well as Congress and the Afghan government and our international partners, I’m announcing an additional adjustment to our posture.

Instead of going down to 5,500 troops by the end of this year, the United States will maintain approximately 8,400 troops in Afghanistan into next year, through the end of my administration. The narrow missions assigned to our forces will not change. They remain focused on supporting Afghan forces and going after terrorists. But maintaining our forces at this specific level -- based on our assessment of the security conditions and the strength of Afghan forces -- will allow us to continue to provide tailored support to help Afghan forces continue to improve. From coalition bases in Jalalabad and Kandahar, we’ll be able to continue supporting Afghan forces on the ground and in the air. And we continue supporting critical counterterrorism operations.

And in reaffirming the enduring commitment of the United States to Afghanistan and its people, the decision I’m making today can help our allies and partners align their own commitments. As you know, tomorrow, I depart for the NATO Summit in Warsaw, where I’ll meet with our coalition partners and Afghan President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah. Many of our allies and partners have already stepped forward with commitments of troops and funding so we can keep strengthening Afghan forces through the end of this decade. The NATO Summit will be an opportunity for more allies and partners to affirm their contributions -- and I’m confident they will, because all of us have a vital interest in the security and stability of Afghanistan.

My decision today also sends a message to the Taliban and all those who have opposed Afghanistan’s progress. You have now been waging war against the Afghan people for many years. You’ve been unable
to prevail. Afghan security forces continue to grow stronger. And the commitment of the international community, including the United States, to Afghanistan and its people will endure. I will say it again -- the only way to end this conflict and to achieve a full drawdown of foreign forces from Afghanistan is through a lasting political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban. That’s the only way. And that is why the United States will continue to strongly support an Afghan-led reconciliation process, and why we call on all countries in the region to end safe havens for militants and terrorists.

Finally, today’s decision best positions my successor to make future decisions about our presence in Afghanistan. In January, the next U.S. president will assume the most solemn responsibility of the Commander-in-Chief -- the security of the United States and the safety of the American people. The decision I’m making today ensures that my successor has a solid foundation for continued progress in Afghanistan as well as the flexibility to address the threat of terrorism as it evolves.

The president did, however, imply levels of progress in building Afghan forces and in the Afghan civil sector that were—to say the least—uncertain.

Afghanistan is not a perfect place. It remains one of the poorest countries in the world. It is going to continue to take time for them to build up military capacity that we sometimes take for granted. And given the enormous challenges they face, the Afghan people will need the partnership of the world -- led by the United States -- for many years to come. But with our support, Afghanistan is a better place than it once was. Millions of Afghan children -- boys and girls -- are in school. Dramatic improvements in public health have saved the lives of mothers and children. Afghans have cast their ballots in democratic elections and seen the first democratic transfer of power in their country's history. The current National Unity Government continues to pursue reforms -- including record revenues last year -- to strengthen their country and, over time, help decrease the need for international support.

That government is a strong partner with us in combatting terrorism. That’s the progress we’ve helped make possible. That’s the progress that our troops have helped make possible, and our diplomats, and our development personnel.

**The Impact on Our Allies of Further U.S. Cuts**

If one looks for the full rationale behind the only tangible change between June and July, one can scarcely ignore the fact that the United States cannot choose its approach to Afghanistan without affecting all of the other states that now provide Afghanistan with military and financial assistance. Although no public official report ever mentions the risk, it is critical to point out that any major U.S. troop cuts by the end of 2016 might well lead many NATO and other allies to make similar reductions or leave Afghanistan. Secretary Carter noted at the press conference mentioned earlier that,

Regarding U.S. troop levels for future years,’ the secretary said, “the current plan announced last August is for 9,800 U.S. service members to remain in Afghanistan for most of this year and … to draw down that number to 5,500 by the end of the year…other nations also have decided to commit to having forces in Afghanistan beyond this year. “This commitment will be part of NATO's flexible regional approach to the Resolute Support mission,” Carter said. “The United States will continue to lead the NATO effort in southern and eastern Afghanistan, and we will continue to provide coalition partners with sufficient enabling capabilities needed for their own presence, particularly in northern and western Afghanistan.”

Keeping Allied force levels and aid contributions up are critical when U.S. forces are so low. The DoD Report for July 2016 notes that, “As of May 27, 2016, RS was composed of military personnel from 37 nations (25 NATO Allies and 12 operational partner nations), consisting of 13,496 NATO and 1,559 partner personnel across 20 bases totaling 15,055 personnel…The United States remains the largest force contributor in Afghanistan (8,179 U.S. or 54% of 15,055).”

The DoD report also shows the importance of their role by area,
The four coalition framework nations maintain a central “hub” in Kabul and a regional presence in four “spokes” in the north, south, east, and west regions of the country through the TAACs. Turkey leads TAAC-Capital (TAAC-C) in the Kabul area, the United States leads TAAC-East (TAAC-E) and TAAC-South (TAAC-S), Italy leads TAAC-West (TAAC-W), and Germany leads TAAC-North (TAAC-N). Personnel at each TAAC conduct training and provide advice and assistance to their Afghan counterparts depending on the need identified by the coalition and their Afghan partners. In addition, the Advise and Assist Directorate (AAD) provides oversight of regional AACs that cover two ANA corps and the ANP zones in those areas with expeditionary advising support while TAAC-Air provides TAA support to the AAF.

… TAAC-C includes Kabul Province (except Sarobi District). Turkish forces lead the TAA effort with forces from several additional contributing nations… Train, Advise, and Assist Command – East (TAAC-E), which includes U.S. and Polish forces, covers the provinces of Kapisa, Kunar, Laghman, Nangarhar, and Nuristan… TAAC-W, led by Italian forces, includes Badghis, Farah, Ghor, and Herat provinces… TAAC-N, led by German forces, includes the provinces of Badakhshan, Baghlan, Balkh, Faryab, Jawzjan, Kunduz, Samangan, Sar-e Pul, and Takhar… However, current TAA efforts are limited primarily to the Mazar-e-Sharif area.

**The Future Role of U.S. Forces: Mission One—Train and Assist, But Don’t Get Close Enough to Succeed, Don’t Enable, and Don’t Size the Effort to the Need and Conditions on the Ground**

Neither the June 10th background statement nor the President’s July 7th statement provide much detail on the future role U.S. forces would play. The July version of the DoD report did, however, say some additional things about future U.S. force levels:13

Consistent with the President’s October 2015 announcement that U.S. forces would maintain a force posture in Afghanistan of up to 9,800 military personnel through most of 2016, USFOR-A maintained its forces at or below this level throughout the reporting period… These U.S. forces served alongside approximately 6,876 forces from NATO Allied and partner nations who are committed to Afghanistan’s continued development. In particular, the continued U.S. and coalition presence in Afghanistan is focused on making progress in developing the ANDSF into a more effective, sustainable, and affordable force that can protect the Afghan people and contribute to regional and international security. This force presence will also help prevent threats to the homeland, U.S. allies, and U.S. interests abroad from terrorist actors in the region, particularly al Qaeda, and it will maintain pressure on other terrorist groups such as IS-K.

Approximately 9,800 U.S. military personnel remain in Afghanistan at the invitation of the Afghan government to achieve these objectives… These personnel will maintain a presence at a small number of bases in Kabul and Bagram with regional outstations, including in Jalalabad, Nangarhar Province in the east, and Kundahar Province in the south.

The DoD report also made it clear that the U.S. was not formally committing personnel to training, assistance, and enabling roles near Afghan combat forces—although many senior U.S. and Afghan officers feel this latter role is critical, has proved critical in other cases from Korea to Iraq, and that even the 9,800 total—which cannot adequately cover every Corps—is critical in covering Afghan combat units or “Kandaks”:14

… With support from the Afghan government and the Afghan people, USFOR-A is conducting two well-defined and complementary missions as part of OFS to achieve U.S. objectives and build upon the gains of the last 14 years… First, through OFS, U.S. forces are continuing the counterterrorism mission against al Qaeda and its associates in Afghanistan to prevent its resurgence and external plotting against the homeland and U.S. targets and interests in the region. Second, in coordination with NATO Allies and operational partner nations, U.S. forces are conducting a TAA mission to continue building the capabilities and long-term sustainability of the ANDSF, the MoD, and the MoI. The U.S. supports the institutionalization of ANDSF gains by conducting functionally based security force assistance (SFA) as part of the NATO-led RS mission. U.S. and coalition forces conduct TAA efforts at the ANA corps level, the ANP zone level, and with MoD and the MoI to improve their ability to support and sustain the fighting force. Reflecting the importance
of building Afghan aviation and special operations capabilities, U.S. and coalition forces also train, advise, and assist at the tactical level for the AAF and special operations units.

Although the planned reduction to 5,500 military personnel will limit some functions, the United States will be able to tailor TAA efforts to continue developing Afghan ministerial capacity and key ANDSF capabilities in areas such as aviation, intelligence, special operations, logistics, and maintenance, as well as maintain a U.S. capability to deter and disrupt threats in the region. This presence enables a platform that will allow the United States both to pursue counterterrorism targets and to assist the ANDSF in further developing their special operations capability, which has proved increasingly critical to U.S. counterterrorism and broader security interests. This posture reflects a consolidation of U.S. forces and takes advantages of efficiencies gained by working with and sharing functions with coalition partners and the ANDSF.

There is almost nothing more meaningless than a troop total like 9,800, 8,400, or 5,500—figures that are not tied to specific explanations of what part of the total perform a given function with given capabilities and given resources. This is particularly true when the totals involved were set years earlier for political purposes in carrying out a near total withdrawal that was never tied to the real world conditions on the ground—conditions which have proven far less favorable than the original withdrawal policy assumed.

It is also important to point out that such aid to the Afghan military is only part of the story. The Afghan National Police (ANP) and Afghan Local Police (ALP) play a critical role in paramilitary operations and in holding areas once the military has cleared them of an active insurgent presence. They too need advisors and enablers, and—with the partial exception of the more elite Afghan National Civil Order Police (ANCOP) elements of the ANP—are far less capable and trained. And, they are far more likely to be corrupted or involved in local political feuds and conflicts.

The importance of the ANP and ALP is also illustrated by how large a share they are of total Afghan forces. The current total ANDSF authorized force level as part of the tashkil remains at 352,000 ANA and ANP personnel plus 30,000 ALP, or a total of 382,000 authorized personnel. The ALP is funded solely by the United States, and although it is overseen by the MoI, it is not part of the 352,000 authorized ANDSF Tashkil. The Afghan armed forces have an authorized total of 195,000 or 51% of the total. The ANP makes up 157,000 or 41%. The ALP make up another 8%.

**The Future Role of U.S. Forces: Mission Two—Stay in Combat but Call It Counterterrorism, and Don’t Size the Effort to the Need**

As for the role of the other U.S. air and ground forces that are actually in combat, the DoD report called this combat “counterterrorism”—just as the president did—and described this role as follows:15

U.S. counterterrorism efforts remain focused on the defeat of al Qaeda and its associates, protecting U.S. forces, and preventing Afghanistan from becoming a safe haven for terrorists to plan attacks against the U.S. homeland and against U.S. interests and partners. Counterterrorism efforts in Afghanistan have helped to ensure that there has not been another major terrorist attack against the U.S. homeland since September 11, 2001. However, the existence of other extremist groups in Afghanistan, such as IS-K, requires a U.S. presence in the region that can monitor and address threats, even as the United States builds an Afghan capability to deter terrorist exploitation of Afghan territory.

In addition to the primary U.S. counterterrorism objectives, during this reporting period the President authorized U.S. forces to target individuals based on their status as members of IS-K in order to disrupt and degrade the group’s ability to threaten U.S., coalition, and Afghan government interests. Previously, U.S. forces were only authorized to take direct action against members of IS-K if they posed an imminent threat to U.S. or coalition forces or took a direct part in hostilities against U.S. or coalition forces. Degrading IS-K is part of the U.S. global effort to counter ISIL. In addition to U.S. unilateral efforts, USFOR-A is enabling
the ANDSF to conduct independent operations against IS-K and is encouraging more robust intelligence and operational cooperation between Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other regional partners to impede the spread of the organization.

The United States remains in an armed conflict against al Qaeda, the Taliban, and associated forces. The United States continues to rely on the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force and the President’s constitutional authority as the Commander in Chief as its domestic legal basis for the use of force when required. Beyond operations in support of the counterterrorism mission and enabler support to the ANDSF in limited circumstances, U.S. forces no longer engage in offensive combat operations in Afghanistan; in particular, the United States does not conduct offensive operations against members of the Taliban or members of the Taliban-led insurgency. However, U.S. forces may take appropriate action against those groups or individuals that imminently threaten or directly participate in hostilities against U.S. or coalition forces regardless of their membership in a particular terrorist or extremist group.

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Limited U.S. direct counterterrorism action, coupled with a stronger and increasingly capable ANDSF, will help preserve the security gains to date and contribute to a robust, enduring counterterrorism partnership. The Special Operations Joint Task Force – Afghanistan (SOJTF-A) supports U.S. counterterrorism efforts by training, advising, and assisting the ASSF and accompanying them on certain operations. The ASSF will continue to conduct operations throughout the country using their growing organic capabilities to address both insurgent and transnational threats. The focus of SOJTF-A TAA efforts remains building the ASSF’s capacity in logistics, command and control, intelligence analysis and sharing, aviation, and interoperability between the ASSF and conventional forces. Tactical-level advising of Afghan special operation units has been essential as U.S. forces assess the operational performance of those partner units to shape future training and development more effectively.

The problem is that neither the DoD report or the president’s July 6th statement said anything about the scale of such U.S. support at a time when Afghan forces are under heavy and constant pressure, are taking critical casualties, and are suffering from a serious attrition problem and a growing replacement problem.

This is not a minor issue when statements like the following were buried in other sections of the DoD report, “IS-K has regressed since its initial growth and operational emergence in 2015. Several factors have disrupted IS-K’s growth strategy and diminished its operational capacity including U.S. offensive counterterrorism operations against the group after receiving expanded targeting authorities…”

The President’s July 7th statement also dodged neatly around the possibility that counterterrorism meant combat with the Taliban or Haqqani network by saying that, “our forces are now focused on two narrow missions: training and advising Afghan forces, and supporting counterterrorist operations against the remnants of al Qaida as well as other terrorist groups, including ISIL.” “Other terrorist groups” clearly included the Taliban and Haqqani network. Combat by any other name is not a rose.

**The Critical Role of U.S. Air Power**

Unlike the White House Background Briefing, Secretary Carter’s press statement, and the president’s statement, the DoD’s July report makes no mention of the U.S. role in providing air power. This is just as critical a failure in providing any clear picture of what the U.S. should do as the failure to reassess the need for the total number of U.S. advisors, what they do, and how many are needed as forward enablers.

Airpower is a critical equalizer when a limited Afghan force of uncertain quality must disperse throughout the country, cannot quickly and efficiently reinforce, and has limited real airpower of
its own. Even U.S. and allied forces found in earlier fighting that quick reaction airpower was critical in avoiding tactical defeats in a crisis.

The Air Force public affairs office of the U.S. Central Command reports that the total number of U.S. close air support sorties dropped from a peak of 34,514 for the entire year of 2011 to 28,760 in 2012, 21,900 in 2013, 12,978 in 2013, 5,774 in 2014, and to 2,107 from January 1 to May 31, 2016.\(^7\) The number that actually fired a munition was far smaller: 2,678 for the entire year of 2011 to 1,975 in 2012, 1,408 in 2013, 1,136 in 2014, 411 in 2015; and 220 from January 1 to May 31, 2016.\(^8\)

It is important to note that the sortie rate in some other aspects of U.S. airpower have dropped far less—perhaps because they do not seem to meet the Administration’s definition of combat. Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) sorties dropped from 38,198 for the entire year of 2011 to 34,937 in 2012, 31,049 in 2013, 32,999 in 2014, 20,666, in 2013; and to 8,765 from January 1 to May 31, 2016.\(^9\) At the same time, Air cargo, air drop, and tanker sorties, have, however been cut much more sharply.\(^10\)

These cuts in U.S. air support came far more quickly than the efforts to rush an effective Afghan Air Force into existence after 2011 could cope with. It is all very well for the DoD July report to state that,\(^11\)

> The AAF is the primary air enabler for the ANDSF, responsible for air mobility and close air attack across all of Afghanistan. The AAF can independently plan for and provide air assets for logistics, resupply, humanitarian relief efforts, human remains return, CASEVAC, non-traditional ISR, air interdiction, armed overwatch, and aerial escort mission sets. The AAF headquarters is located in Kabul and provides command and control of three wings, the Kabul Air Wing, Kandahar Air Wing, Shindand Air Wing, and eleven detachments, five of which have aircraft assigned (Mazar-e Sharif, Jalalabad, Shorab, Gardez, and in Herat Province). TAAC-Air provides tactical level train, advise, and assist support to the AAF at Kabul and Kandahar.

The practical strength of the AAF, however, is far too low to meet the need, and it is being expanded very quickly and under considerable pressure:\(^12\)

> As of May 31, 2016, the AAF has a total of 104 aircraft, a 13 percent increase over the last reporting period. Fixed-wing platforms include C-208s, C-130s, and A-29s; rotary-wing platforms include Mi-35s...Mi-17s, MD-530s, and Cheetahs.\(^52\) During the reporting period, the U.S. delivered eight A-29 Super Tucano aircraft (fixed-wing light attack aircraft) to Afghanistan, and deliveries of the remaining 20 aircraft will continue through 2018. Although the AAF continues to develop pilots, some platforms are limited by an insufficient number of flight engineers or other personnel that comprise a fully trained flight crew. As a result, the AAF may sometimes employ its aircraft without a full flight crew.

> ...C-130 operations are currently limited by a shortage in qualified aircrew members. TAAC-Air and the AAF are working hard to accelerate the growth of flight engineers and loadmasters through in-country training. There are adequate numbers of pilots at various stages of the training pipeline and crew manning levels will significantly improve in 2016.

> ...A shortage of qualified aircrew members limits the number of C-208 operations the AAF can conduct. This shortage is primarily due to reassignment of C-208 pilots to A-29 and PC-12 aircraft. Low pilot manning numbers will improve as the training pipeline increases pilot output throughout 2016. Recent training efforts in the C-208 include aircraft commander, instructor pilot, and evaluator pilot upgrades in support of building a self-sustaining force.

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in the C-208 include aircraft commander, instructor pilot, and evaluator pilot upgrades in support of building a self-sustaining force.

The first four U.S.-trained Afghan A-29 pilots made their maiden flight in Afghanistan on January 31, 2016. The AAF used the A-29s to provide support to the ANDSF throughout the reporting period, including in support of ANA 209th Corps operations with the A-29s first combat airstrike in Badakhshan Province on April 14, 2016. Initially, the AAF will rely on CLS to sustain the A-29s while Afghan maintenance personnel continue to be trained in the United States.

The Mi-17 helicopter conducts day and night personnel transport, CASEVAC, resupply, close combat attack, aerial escort, and aerial assault missions. Making up just less than half of total AAF aircraft, the Mi-17 is considered the “workhorse” of the AAF. The AAF is capable of deploying and operating Mi-17s throughout the country.

Twelve Mi-17s are configured with a fixed forward firing capability and seven of those are also capable of employing rockets. Armed Mi-17s accounted for over 81 percent of the aerial fires missions tasked in support of ANDSF operations during the reporting period. Using the Mi-17s as armed gunships limits the AAF’s ability to employ Mi-17s in support of other mission sets such as CASEVAC and aerial resupply.

Moreover, with the Mi-17s high attrition rate, the number of AAF Mi-17s available for the second half of 2016 and 2017 will be significantly diminished.

The AAF has adequate numbers of Mi-17 aircrew to operate the current fleet but is not projected to reach full manning until 2017. During the reporting period, Mi-17 gunship qualified aircrews expanded from 19 to 26, including two qualified AAF instructor pilots.

The MD-530 helicopter provides close air attack and aerial escort capability to the ANDSF. On January 23, 2016, four MD-530s were delivered to Kabul after undergoing upgrade modifications in the United States, bringing the total to 18 delivered since March 2015. Planned deliveries through the end of 2016 will bring the total AAF MD-530 fleet to 27. Currently, the MD-530 weapons load is limited to two .50 caliber machine guns. However, TAAC-Air is working with the AAF to add a rocket-firing capability to all aircraft over the course of 2016. Building upon progress during the last reporting period, the AAF has developed and executed limited expeditionary capability for the MD-530 facilitating operations outside of Kabul, including in Kandahar Province, Shorab in Helmand, and Tarin Kowt in Uruzgan.

The AAF now provide almost all aerial fires in support of ANDSF operations, relying on its small number of fixed forward firing modified Mi-17s, armed MD-530 light attack helicopters, and recently acquired A-29 light attack aircraft. Based on the transition to the RS mission, coalition aerial fires support to independent ANDSF operations has been significantly curtailed. However, U.S. and coalition aerial fires are employed when necessary to provide enabling support to the ANDSF as authorized by NATO and U.S. authorities granted to Commander, RS, and Commander, USFOR-A, respectively.

The AAF is supplemented by four squadrons of the Special Mission Wing (SMW) of the Afghan Special Forces, but the Special Mission Wing is badly undermanned and overtasked in providing, “counterterrorism and counternarcotics missions designed to disrupt insurgent and drug smuggling networks in Afghanistan. The SMW enables helicopter assault force raids and provides resupply, close air attack, CASEVAC, and ISR support for ASSF and ANA conventional forces. The SMW is the only ANDSF pillar with night-vision, rotary-wing air assault, and fixed-wing ISR capabilities.”

If the United States is to shift away from the present constant focus on artificial deadlines and total manpower cuts, and on how quickly it can reduce its total personnel and leave—and if the United States is then to focus on how to help the Afghans deal with the real-world conditions on the ground and win—it needs to provide credible levels of air power.

**Matching Military Support to U.S. Financial Aid**

The United States has publically pledged to keep providing Afghanistan with military financial aid through at least 2020. It hardly seems necessary to point out that such aid will only be provided
if Afghanistan can keep fighting. It is also clear, however, that Afghanistan cannot survive without such U.S. aid.

As the July report by DoD notes,\textsuperscript{24}

The requirement to fund the current ANDSF force structure in FY 2016 is $5.01 billion and is expected to decrease to approximately $4.72 billion in FY 2017. For FY 2016 the United States funded $3.65 billion of the cost of the ANDSF ($2.60 billion for the MoD and $1.05 billion for the MoI) through the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF). Approximately $1.762 billion of the FY 2016 ASFF was provided directly to the Afghan government ($1.29 billion for the MoD and $472 million for the MoI) to fund salaries and incentive pay, equipment, facilities maintenance, and fuel costs.

The other $1.887 billion of the FY 2016 ASFF is executed by DoD primarily through contracts on Foreign Military Sales cases. The remaining $1.36 billion of ANDSF costs were funded by international donors ($860 million for ANP salaries, information technology, aviation training and maintenance, uniforms, and medical supplies) and the Afghan government ($500 million, primarily for food and subsistence).

The United States, along with international partners, is working closely with the Afghans to reduce ANDSF costs further through a number of cost savings initiatives, most notably the divestiture of excess facilities. The MoD and the MoI have signed plans committing themselves to divesting 90 of 160 MoD facilities and 104 of 205 MoI facilities in Afghan FY 1395.33 The divestment of excess facilities will reduce operations and maintenance costs and ensure the ANDSF are maximizing facility utilization. The ANDSF have also made noteworthy improvements in their ability to contract for food and domestic fuel to ensure that products and services are provided for the ANA and ANP at fair and reasonable prices. Moreover, CSTC-A continues to take steps to increase the MoD’s and MoI’s ability to manage international donor funding directly and in a fiscally transparent and accountable manner. Finally, CSTC-A is able to leverage bilateral funding commitment letters to hold the MoD and the MoI accountable for managing programs effectively and to ensure that transparency and accountability remains an important aspect of MoD, MoI, and ANDSF operations. Given the continued requirement for significant ANDSF security assistance funding by international donors, tangible progress in ministerial capability, budgetary transparency, and gradual ANDSF cost reduction will be critical to maintaining donor confidence moving forward.

The report by DoD also notes that,\textsuperscript{25}

The United States provides the bulk of funding necessary to build, train, equip, and sustain the ANDSF through ASFF, an annual appropriation made available to the Secretary of Defense, with the concurrence of the Secretary of State, for the purpose of providing assistance to the security forces of Afghanistan. ASFF is a key enabler and critical component of the U.S. mission, providing the funding necessary to establish an effective, sustainable, and affordable ANDSF. The FY 2016 ASFF appropriation is $3.652 billion, and the President’s FY 2017 budget request includes $3.448 billion requested for ASFF. Since FY 2005, Congress has appropriated more than $63 billion for ASFF.

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… At the 2011 Bonn Conference, the international community agreed to support the training, equipping, financing, and capability development of the ANDSF beyond December 31, 2014. At the 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago, the international community reaffirmed its commitment to this process and to the financial sustainment of the ANDSF. Financial commitments made during or in the run up to the Chicago Summit totaled more than $1 billion per year for 2015, 2016, and 2017 (in 2012 dollars), divided between NATF and LOTFA. At the 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, the international community reaffirmed its commitment to the financial sustainment of the ANDSF, and nations renewed their financial pledges through 2018.
These dollars are tied to the level of U.S. and allied military support for the Afghan forces, and their overall level of military success. It seems highly unlikely that that United States, its allies, and other aid donors can decouple their levels of military (and civil) aid from the course of the fighting. It also seems fairly clear that the risk of almost an indefinite period of conflict is much higher, even if the Afghan government survives, if the United States does not provide “conditions-based” levels of troops, the right kind of forward deployed enablers and advisors, and the necessary amount of airpower.

It is equally clear that the United States and other outside powers can only establish conditionality over a government that they support and that survives. This is not a casual issue in a government that is so politically divided, weak, and corrupt. The need for successful outside pressure on the Afghan government is as great in many ways as the need for outside help in defeating the Taliban.

**Congress Opt for Hollow Rhetoric and Partisanship Over Military Need and Substance**

Any criticism of the Obama Administration has to be matched by an equal criticism of a highly partisan Republican majority in Congress. So far, the Congress has contributed very little to any meaningful aspect of the debate on U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and the role the United States should play. It is striking that the DoD report should have a footnote that declares, “Per the reporting requirement outlined in section 1213 of the NDAA for FY 2016, because there was no drawdown of U.S. forces during this reporting period, this report does not contain an assessment of the risks to the mission in Afghanistan of such a drawdown.”

In other words, the report does not address the risks from planned or announced U.S. strategies and actions, only risks after drawdown has actually occurred—a Congressionally mandated escape clause that effectively eliminates Congressional responsibility.

It is Congress that should drive transparency when the Administration fails to provide it, and all too often, it has put partisanship first. Some members do address the problems in the current U.S. strategy and the way it is implemented, but the Congress—both in terms of the key committees involved and the Congress as a whole—seems incapable of drafting reporting requirements that can lead to an objective and bipartisan Congressional review and debate over the future course of the war.

The public parts of the House and Senate strategy hearings never really address the details of the U.S. effort, the nature of the threat, or the fact that the Afghan government is often as much of a problem as the enemy. Rhetoric and broad goals are confused with strategy. The need for integrated civil-military efforts, detailed plans, detailed assessments of the resources involved, clear efforts to tie U.S. efforts to “conditionality” on the part of the Afghans. Congress seems unable to address each of the issues just discussed, and seems incapable of seeking effective reporting and hearings on even such basic issues as what the size and role of specific elements of U.S. forces should be.

**The Other Half of Strategy: Failing to Address the Civil Side of the War**

Every insurgency, and major terrorist campaign is a war for both the hearts and minds of the population and control of their bodies. Like it or not, such conflicts are won or lost both on the basis of military success and success in armed nation building. Insurgent and terrorist threats can only become critical when a nation’s politics, governance, or economy have critical divisions and failures. They generally
occur in what are, or are close to, “failed states” whose structures pose as much of a threat to itself as does the enemy.

**The Enemy is Only One of Three Threats**

Afghanistan—like Iraq and Syria—is a classic example of the fact that any U.S. effort to intervene in such conflict faces three threats and not one:

- *The first is the actual enemy that shapes the fighting*: The Taliban, Al Qa’ida, ISIS, and the other actors that pose a direct terrorist or military threat. This threat is both obvious and critical. No military solution alone can win against a serious threat to the equivalent of a failed state, but no civil solution can occur without t effective security forces and the effective use of force.

- *The second is the host country government the U.S. is seeking to aid*: Almost inevitably, the inadequacies of the host country go far beyond its security forces, and where key changes or reforms are needed in its politics, governance, and/or economy for any form of “victory” or stable outcome to occur that is not based on the extreme use of force or repression. The phrase “win, hold, and build” is not a cliché. Key aspects of the civil structure of a given host country must change to enable and secure tactical victories, and change even more to secure a lasting peace.

- *The third is the threat the U.S. poses to itself*: The inability to adequately and objectively assess all of the challenges the United States will face in engaging in a conflict in a particular country, culture, and mix of neighboring states. The learning curve and cost of adapting U.S. counterinsurgency capabilities to both a given host country and a given mix of threats, and the fact the United States has no clear institutional capability to address the civil or nation building side of the conflict, and choose between given forms of aid and setting conditions and push the host government towards reform. These are tasks that fall upon the departments of State and Defense, and USAID with State, for which no element of the U.S. government is properly organized and resourced to deal with.

**Failing the Civil Challenge**

One of the tragedies of the Afghan conflict, as well as the Iraq and Syria conflicts, is that most of the efforts to strengthen the Afghan political system, governance, and economy during 2002-2014—the time U.S. allied forces effectively occupied the country—failed to deal with Afghanistan’s critical civil problems and several critical efforts—like the drafting of the Afghan constitution, the failure to reform its government and moderate corruption, and the lack of any coherent approach to development aid and reform—wasted resources and did more harm than good.

Efforts to create effective integrated civil-military plans never produced effective results before most U.S. and allied forces left Afghanistan at the end of 2014, and aid was sharply cut. Neither did efforts to set forth clear milestones and measures of effectiveness for Afghan reform and the use of aid and actually implement them. The road was always paved with good intentions, but never led in the right direction.

USAID and other national efforts, along with the Provincial Reconstruction Team Effort and CERP focused on uncoordinated and ill-planned direct efforts that often were decoupled from the war and broader national needs. Aid money never properly controlled. UNAMA, the UN agency supposedly in charge of coordinating international aid, never played an effective role in doing so. Both outside military and spending in country were poorly allocated, poorly controlled, and grossly overspent on given projects and efforts.
Worse, the Obama Administration and other officials claimed levels of success that they clearly did not achieve. They tolerated a series of promises of reform that did not take place or were too limited and symbolic to have a major effect. The reported levels of progress that could not be supported by valid analysis, and failed to make effective efforts at pressuring the Afghan government to change. Combined with the failures of similar U.S.-led efforts in Iraq, these failures largely discredited the whole concept of “nation building” and the need to properly address the civil side of the conflict.

Failed Governance and Rule of Law

Worse, the resulting flood of uncontrolled outside funds became a major force that helped give Afghanistan the ranking of one of the most corrupt nations in the world. The World Bank made this all too clear in the governance rankings shown below. Transparency International consistently ranked it as one of the most corrupt governments in the world, and ranked it as the 166th most corrupt country out of 168 in 2015.

These problems were compounded by deep sectarian and ethnic divisions, by a constitution that did not create a valid basis for a truly representative legislature and gave the President almost total control over central government funds, and by the fact that the shell of democratic government in Kabul was offset by the reality of government by power broker in much of the country.

Afghan politics first became a Karzai government that put juggling power brokers and key political and security factions before effective governance and reform. When term limits finally force Karzai to step down in 2014, the resulting election was even more corrupt than past elections, and the result had to be chosen on the basis of an awkward political government that created a government divided between Ashraf Ghani as President and Abdullah Abdullah as CEO.

The end result has been a government that is often paralyzed by faction differences, could not even manage the key security ministries as U.S. and allied forces largely left, and is supposed to find some new political solution and leadership in the fall of 2016—either by a new election or some broad popular assembly.

Afghanistan is also a violent society where rapid justice along traditional lines is often the key to halting civil conflicts. Efforts to introduce alien concepts of law and law enforcement from the top down, and the consistent failure of anti-corruption efforts, led many polls to show the Afghan people rank the government’s corruption and incompetence as nearly as much of a concern as the threat. In some cases, it even led Afghans to prefer the Taliban for its extreme but effective approach to law and “justice.” At the same time, the lack of economic reform and development helped keep Afghanistan a narco-economy in spite of failed counternarcotics efforts.
World Bank Rating of Afghan Governance: The Failure of reform and Progress from 2001-2015:


Economic Crisis in the Face of Acute Population Pressure and a Massive “Youth Bulge”

As the World Bank, IMF, and CIA have reported throughout the Afghan conflict, Afghanistan’s problems in politics and governance, and lack of effective governance and economic development efforts—coupled with its endemic corruption—have posed a constant problem. This is illustrated by the key findings of a World Bank assessment of the Afghan economy in February 2016.27

Afghanistan is a deeply fragile and conflict affected state. It has been in almost constant conflict for over 35 years since the Soviet invasion of 1979. Today the country is at a crossroads in its development with economic growth down sharply and poverty incidence stubbornly high. Afghanistan faces tremendous development challenges. Gross domestic product (GDP) per-capita is among the lowest in the world, poverty is deep and widespread, and social indicators are still at very low levels.

High poverty rate and low economic growth
The poverty rate remained stagnant at 36 percent despite good economic growth between 2007 and 2011. The highest poverty incidence is found in the rural areas, where livelihoods are dependent on agriculture.

Inequality increased with unequal distribution of growth. The SCD identified lagging regions in the Northeast, East, and West Central regions in the country that appear to have fallen behind due to remote access, climatic shocks, lower aid and fragility.

Economic growth fell sharply to 1.5-2 percent in 2014 and 2015 as private sector confidence slumped and a fiscal crisis unfolded.

International development aid contributed to growth and jobs in high-conflict areas, however it did not contribute to raising productivity.

Unemployment, natural hazards, lack of access to services, and violence are the main factors behind the high rate of poverty in Afghanistan.

Development challenges are further amplified by growing insecurity, uncertainty, and declining aid.

Critical constraints

- Fragility and conflict: the major constraint to development progress is the prevailing insurgency and civil conflict; weak state institutions and dysfunctional societal relations affect almost every aspect of development.

- Demography and geography: pressures of high population growth and a young population are exacerbated by large numbers of returning internally displaced persons or refugees; there are significant disparities in employment generation and access to services, including the widespread exclusion of women from economic participation.

- Declining aid: declining aid will require additional efforts to develop new sources of growth, expand effective service delivery, mobilize revenues and prioritize spending.

Key priorities

- Strong economic growth and job creation: to reduce poverty Afghanistan will require, strong, inclusive economic growth and stable job creation with private sector involvement across all geographic regions in the country.

- Improved prioritized service delivery: continued progress in expanding service delivery is key to addressing critical constraints, with a focus on identifying opportunities to improve effective service delivery, and strengthening capacity and accountability of the public sector.

- Support fiscal stability: significant action is essential to revenue mobilization, securing adequate donor assistance, and expenditure prioritization in order to restore fiscal stability and address the medium-term challenge of reducing dependence on external aid.

Drivers of fragility in Afghanistan fall into three broad groups. First, weak state and political institutions, with unclear authorities and dependent on external assistance, leads to decisions often being driven more by intra-elite bargaining processes than by an effective use of resources and accountability to the local population. This is exacerbated by privileged access by the elite to economic resources—public procurement contracts, revenue sources, land, mining contracts, and proceeds from illicit economic activities. Second, the persistent Taliban insurgency is bolstered both by external forces as well as internally by poor governance. The interconnection between the insurgency and the illicit economy and criminal activities also makes it difficult to bring reconciliation. Third, ethnic divisions have been exacerbated during the past several decades of conflict, including most recently ethnic mobilization during the election process. Mitigation is often sought through distribution of government positions and access to resources through ethnic networks but this again exacerbates governance issues.

Since 2001, there have been noticeable improvements in some areas, particularly in the
management of public finances. Yet, in other areas, such as rule of law and the establishment of a more functional public administration service, progress has been far slower. Reliance on externally contracted civil service capacity remains substantial and core government functions are vulnerable to fluctuations in donor funding. Overall, there is still a widespread culture of impunity for the elite and corruption is rife (Transparency rates Afghanistan as second from bottom out of 174 countries). At the subnational level the overall structure of government is characterized by significant systemic contradictions. Historically, direct formal functional and budget authority for the delivery of most key services in the provinces is held by highly centralized line ministries which work largely on their own with little local coordination between them. Cutting across this system is the system of provincial governors, who have little formal responsibility for service delivery but wield enormous local authority and power. For many Afghans, citizens lack information and feedback venues, the state is remote, petty corruption is endemic and most Afghans perceive they have to pay bribes in order to obtain public services.

An IMF program note issued in April 2016 is somewhat more optimistic, and does not address the growth in poverty since 2007, broad failures in governance, or growing economic crisis that has developed since 2014, or seem to have validated some of its claims to progress. It does note, however, that,28

...security conditions, political uncertainty, and weak institutions continue to constrain growth and weigh on social outcomes. The international community has delivered substantial financial support to fund development and security spending and pledged to continue doing so over the medium term. Donors will discuss aid for Afghanistan at two conferences this year, in Warsaw in July and in Brussels in October.

Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world and relies heavily on donor grants. Per capita income for 2014 is estimated at about US$660, and the country ranks well below its neighbors on most human development indicators despite its progress toward meeting its social and development objectives and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). For example, child mortality has been reduced and school enrollment increased, albeit from very low levels—the enrollment rate for primary school is less than 40 percent. At the same time, achievements in some areas are below expectations; more progress is needed in reducing the number of children under the age of five that are underweight; in increasing access to potable water and sanitation; and improving literacy rates for men and women aged 15 to 24. Overall, the low implementation rate of the development budget impedes more rapid progress toward poverty reduction.

... political and security uncertainties associated with presidential elections and the drawdown of international troops have weighed on economic performance, weakening confidence, and slowing growth down from 14 percent in 2012 to 1.3 percent in 2014. Weak domestic demand, coupled with lower international food prices, has led to deflation. Subpar growth, deflation, declining imports, and lower tax compliance resulted in a decline in domestic revenue collection, while higher social and development expenditures added to spending. As a result, the treasury’s cash position deteriorated and arrears were incurred. A deterioration in the banking sector’s asset quality exposed vulnerabilities and weaknesses, with eight of 16 banks rated as weak.

The CIA has not updated some of the data in its World Factbook since FY2008/2009, and often does not reflect the deterioration of the country since 2014. Even then, however, the CIA estimated that unemployment was 35% and poverty was 36%. It estimates the current dependency ratio at a high 87%, the median age at only 18, and that 64% of the population is 24 years of age or younger, with 41% at 14 years or younger.

These data are of particular importance because so little attention is paid to Afghan population growth and pressure. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that Afghanistan's population was only 8.2 million in 1950. It grew to 15.6 million in 1979, when the former Soviet Union (FSU) invaded. It was 22.5 million in 2001. It has since grown to 33.3 million in 2016, and is estimated to be million in 36.6 2020, and 63.8 million in 2050.29

The CIA World Factbook also notes that,30
...Despite the progress of the past few years, Afghanistan is extremely poor, landlocked, and highly dependent on foreign aid. Much of the population continues to suffer from shortages of housing, clean water, electricity, medical care, and jobs. Criminality, insecurity, weak governance, lack of infrastructure, and the Afghan Government's difficulty in extending rule of law to all parts of the country pose challenges to future economic growth. Afghanistan's living standards are among the lowest in the world.

The international community remains committed to Afghanistan's development, pledging over $67 billion at nine donors' conferences between 2003 and 2010. In July 2012, the donors at the Tokyo conference pledged an additional $16 billion in civilian aid through 2015. Despite this help, the Government of Afghanistan will need to overcome a number of challenges, including low revenue collection, anemic job creation, high levels of corruption, weak government capacity, and poor public infrastructure.

Afghanistan's growth rate slowed markedly in 2014-15. The drawdown of international security forces that started in 2014 has negatively affected economic growth, as a substantial portion of commerce, especially in the services sector, has catered to the ongoing international troop presence in the country. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai is dedicated to instituting economic reforms to include improving revenue collection and fighting corruption. However, the reforms will take time to implement and Afghanistan will remain dependent on international donor support over the next several years.

The CIA does not note that there have been more than seven economic and governance reform plans since 2001, that none have so far been implemented, and that a divided Ghani government may not last out the year.

**Dealing with Narcotics by Omission and Denial**

Equally important, none of these sources fully address the critical impact of narcotics on the Afghan economy, politics, government, and corruption. The CIA states this in its Factbook. The World Bank and IMF tend to downplay its importance or ignore it in their data, while other sources limit their assessment to inherently ridiculous estimates based largely on farm gate prices, rather than the added value it acquires once it leaves the grower.

In contrast, the U.S. State Department’s 2015 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) report for 2015 notes that, 31

Illicit narcotic cultivation, production, trafficking, and consumption flourish in Afghanistan, particularly in areas where instability is high and state institutions are weak or non-existent. About 90 percent of illicit poppy cultivation takes place in these regions. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and the Afghan Ministry of Counternarcotics (MCN) estimate that 224,000 hectares (ha) of opium were cultivated in Afghanistan in 2014, with a total yield of 6,400 metric tons (MT) of raw opium. This represents a seven percent increase in cultivation and a 17 percent increase in opium production from 2013. The U.S. government estimates that 211,000 ha of opium were cultivated in Afghanistan in 2014, with a total yield of 6,300 MT of raw opium. Notably, the southern half of Afghanistan continues to account for the vast majority of poppy cultivation in the country. Helmand and Kandahar alone accounted for 61 percent of the cultivation. Above-average growing conditions for winter crops led to an increase in the average yield of opium per hectare, from 26.3 kg/ha in 2013 to 28.6 kg/ha in 2014.

A symbiotic relationship exists between the insurgency and narcotics trafficking in Afghanistan. Traffickers provide weapons, funding, and other material support to the insurgency in exchange for the protection of drug trade routes, fields, laboratories, and trafficking organizations. Some insurgent commanders engage directly in drug trafficking to finance their operations. However, drug trafficking is not limited to insurgent-controlled areas and the narcotics trade and undermines governance and rule of law throughout the country.

Afghanistan is deeply involved in every facet of the narcotics production cycle, from cultivation to heroin production to consumption. Drug traffickers trade in all forms of opiates, including unrefined opium, semi-refined morphine base, and refined heroin. The Afghan narcotics trade is highly evolved. The market prices of opium and its derivatives are sensitive to weather conditions, fluctuations in the costs of inputs, and government intervention. Most Afghan opium is refined into morphine or heroin in Afghanistan or neighboring countries, intended for export.
UN data issued in late 2015 is more reassuring, and reports that opium production dropped significantly in 2015, but this estimate is based on data issued by the Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics. It seems almost certain that Afghan opiate exports still dominated world output in 2015, and approached at least 70% of world exports. They also almost certainly became a larger percent of the real world Afghan GDP because of cuts in aid and military spending. Sheer denial, however, has prevented any clear effort to establish their real impact on the Afghans—although most estimates put it at more than 20%.

A 2016 study by Vanda Felbab Brown of the Brookings Institution notes all too correctly that,

For two decades, opium has been Afghanistan’s leading cash-generating economic activity. Valued at the border, profits from opiates represent about 10-15 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). But when one takes into account macroeconomic spillovers, with drugs underpinning much of the other legal economic activity, drugs easily constitute between a third and a half of the overall economy.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) provides a smaller number—namely, that the farmgate value of opium production in Afghanistan represents a single-digit share of GDP, such as about 4 percent of the country’s GDP in 2013.

But this number is misleading. By focusing on farmgate value only, this number does not take into account value-added in Afghanistan or economic spillover effects, such as the fact that much of the consumption of durables and non-durables, as well as the construction industry, is underpinned by the opium poppy economy.

Like so many aspects of the data on Afghanistan—education, progress in the role of women, medical services, and life expectancy—a failure to address a key aspect of Afghan reality or “spin” critical challenges out of existence makes it difficult to know what the civil problems really are, what their effect is on the war, what policy options the U.S. really has, and what the priority is for action.

“Conditionality” or Probable Afghan Defeat

The moment the civilian side of Afghan needs is addressed, it becomes clear that the present U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is even weaker and more poorly defined than the military dimension would indicate. As of March 2016, the United States had already appropriated $31.79 billion for governance and development ($4.16 billion for counternarcotics initiatives); $2.96 billion for humanitarian aid, and $9.98 billion for civilian operations, plus ($4.31 billion for counternarcotics initiatives. This was a total of $49.04 out of $113.17 billion for relief and reconstruction in Afghanistan since fiscal year (FY) 2002, or 43%.

It seems almost certain, however, that U.S. domestic politics and the present lack of ability to put aid teams in the field for security reasons means that the U.S. no longer has the option of providing major economic aid as another tool for armed nation building or as an incentive to the Afghan government. It is also far from clear that the United States would know any more about how to plan and administer such a program than it did in the past.

The FY2017 aid request is sufficiently incoherent and decoupled from the issues flagged by the World Bank, IMF, and CIA to raise serious questions. It is also again striking that the DoD Semi-Annual Report to Congress no longer attempts to cover the civil side, and that they are not addressed in the March 31, 2016 quarterly report on Operation Freedom’s Sentinel by the Lead Inspector General for Overseas Contingency Operations—although Inspector Generals for State and USAID sign off on this report along with the Inspector General for the Department of Defense.
The Quarterly Reports to Congress by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) do cover the civil side of the Afghan conflict, and spending on civil programs by State, USAID, and other agencies and have exposed many of the problems and exaggerated claims of success in these efforts.\textsuperscript{36} It is clear, however, that this office is charge with being an evaluator focused on whether the program was accomplished and the money was properly spent. It is not staffed to act as a planner or implemen ter.

Moreover, any such effort on the civil side would now almost certainly have to wait for the FY2018 budget submission, and any effort that went much beyond initial planning could not begin to be implemented until the Congress funded it and it could actually be implemented in Afghanistan. It is unlikely that it could have much impact until 2019 at the earliest.

The story is probably very different in the case of the military side. The Obama Administration has already backed away from reducing the total number of U.S. troops to 5,500 by the end of 2016, said it will keep 8,400 troops, talked more openly about U.S. support from the air and on the ground, and called for continued efforts to support Afghanistan’s forces through the end of the decade.

President Obama may well be able to get the Congressional and broader public political support to begin to raise the number of advisors-trainer-enablers that Afghan forces need to the still limited levels actually needed, get the backing to put them where they can support Afghan combat forces, and provide the necessary margin of additional combat airpower and direct combat support under the guise of counterterrorism. There seems to be enough Republican and Democratic support in Congress to make a start. Even if this has to wait for the next administration, there will also be time to act before the beginning of the key portions of the campaign season in Afghanistan in 2017.

There should, however, be a clear price for such an increase in the U.S. military effort, as well as for support from other nations. “Conditionality” in granting aid is often rejected on the grounds it is not diplomatic or can produce apolitical backlash in the country involved. As the DoD report for July 2016 indicates, however, there already is a clear need for the Afghan government to take new military steps on its own, and the United States is already applying some aspects of conditionality.\textsuperscript{37}

CSTC-A continues to improve the use of commitment letters to enforce conditionality and provide additional accountability over the use of ASFF. By the end of the first quarter of FY 1395 on March 19, 2016, CSTC-A determined that the MoD and the MoI had achieved satisfactory progress for over 60 percent of the 47 MoD-specific conditions and 48 MoI-specific conditions outlined in the FY 1394 commitment letters. For the 40 percent of conditions that were not met or enforced, CSTC-A deemed that the MoD or the MoI capacity had not matured as anticipated, the conditions were insufficiently measureable or assessable, or enforcing the penalties could have affected the ANDSF’s ability to execute 2015 spring and summer fighting season operations.

The MoD and the MoI signed their respective FY 1395 commitment letters in December 2015 and January 2016. The FY 1395 commitment letters consolidated, eliminated, or refined 85 of the original 170 conditions in the FY 1394 commitment letters. Since the end of the first quarter of FY 1395 on March 19, 2016, the coalition has begun conducting quarterly reviews at the two-star general officer level to measure compliance and determine responses as appropriate when the Afghans do not meet conditions.

The United States should tie future military and economic aid, and any expansion in military aid, to very specific conditions. It should not repeat the long series of efforts to get Afghanistan to pledge actions and reforms, and should tie U.S. aid to clearly defined conditions and timelines for compliance and enforce them by delaying aid when they are not met.
As for the civil side, conditionality cannot fund Afghanistan, but the World Bank and IMF reports cited earlier offer a clear option. They indicate that if Afghanistan moves from talking about reform to actual reform, there will probably be enough aid for it to ride out its current economic problems and move toward development in the future. Relying on international institutions like the World Bank and IMF also eliminates the need for U.S. planning, provides a basis or international coordination and consensus, bypasses the failures of the UN and UNAMA, and does so in ways that will minimize any Afghan reaction that the United States is unfairly interfering in its affairs—a reaction far more likely to come from Afghan power brokers and elites in any case than the Afghan people who have suffered from their failures.

There are risks in such pressure, but it is unlikely that the United States can succeed in Afghanistan without major Afghan reforms. It is one thing to increase U.S. efforts and ensure Afghan success. It is another to waste resources raising the cost of failure.

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1 VOA, “On background attributed to a senior administration official,” June 10, 2016 at 12:32:56 PM EDT
2 VOA, “On background attributed to a senior administration official,” June 10, 2016 at 12:32:56 PM EDT


Cordesman: Obama Strategy in Afghanistan


