The Afghan War: Reshaping American Strategy and Finding Ways to Win

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Executive Summary

When President Obama issued yet another statement regarding Afghanistan on July 6th, and once again delayed his plans to cut the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, he took action 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 quickly losing the war. Unfortunately, keeping the level at 8,400, however, is at best a half measure in meeting Afghanistan’s real needs.

The United States needs a far more serious, and zero-based review of its strategy in Afghanistan. The U.S. should seriously examine its prospects for success, and conduct the kind of “strategic triage” that examines the trade-offs between staying and withdrawal. If the U.S. decides to stay in Afghanistan, however, it needs a conditions based strategy that offers a serious prospect of a lasting military victory, that can win the support of the Afghan people, and build sustained U.S. public and Congressional support.

If this President can still act, the U.S. needs a strategy that can at least try to avoid making Afghanistan an unnecessary pawn in the bitter Presidential campaign, give the Afghans a clear incentive to make critical reforms, and provide a proper legacy for the next President. If such a review has to wait on the new President, the time is long overdue for the kind of comprehensive net assessment that can develop a credible plan of action, and be presented to the Congress and the American people.

Adopting a Conditions Based Military Strategy

Critical changes are needed in the size and nature of the U.S. military train and assist, combat support, and combat missions. The Afghan War is likely to be lost or drag on indefinitely without them. Making the right changes, however, requires far more objective analysis of the fighting and the progress being made by the various insurgents. It also requires a zero-based net assessment that focuses on determining actual Afghan needs, rather than a focus on further U.S. force reductions and setting near-term deadlines for near total withdrawal.

The U.S. needs a military strategy that looks beyond the tactical dimension and focuses on the extent to which the insurgents are making serious gains in controlling given areas and depriving others of security. It needs to examine the ability of the security forces to deny the Taliban and other insurgents control over key elements of the Afghan population and territory. It means providing security, and not simply winning tactical victories. It also means providing the Afghan government with the capability to govern.

It seems unlikely that this will require major U.S. combat units. It seems clear, however, that the U.S. will need plan for an extended effort. It will need to provide more combat air support, limited additional ground elements to help Afghan forces in a crisis, and it will need a far more pervasive train and assist mission that extends down to a limited presence in Afghan combat units, that can push the entire chain of command to become more effective, and that focuses on creating effective Afghan warfighting capability rather than training and generating more manpower.

Determining the right goals, however, will require the U.S. government to stop “spinning” its analysis of the fighting in favorable ways. The U.S. needs to make major changes in the way it assesses and reports on the fighting. It needs to examine the full nature of the threat, and to treat
the Afghan government in real world terms. This means honestly assessing the many weaknesses, corruption, and failures in the present Afghan security forces and the overall structure of Afghan governance and politics, and treating them as part of the threat.

**Giving the Civil Dimension of Counterinsurgency the Same Priority as the Military Dimension**

At the same time, the United States needs a strategy that fully recognizes that counterinsurgency warfare has a civil dimension that is as important as the military one. The U.S. needs to give the civil side of the war the same strategic priority as the military. This does not mean spending far more on the civil side, or to seeking to transform Afghanistan into a modern state with different values. Wasting money on such efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan has already proved to be a dismal and expensive failure.

It does, however mean paying proper attention to the fact that counterinsurgency and irregular/asymmetric wars have to be won on the civil-military level – not just the military level. It requires the U.S. to go from a “hole in government” approach to the equivalent of a “revolution in civil-military affairs.”

This kind of “nation building” does not require the U.S. to take on “mission impossible,” but it does mean making U.S. military and civil aid and support dependent on enough Afghan reforms to allow the government to fight effectively, win popular support, and meet the urgent needs of its people.

The Afghan government must show it has achieved enough political unity to actually win a war and serve the Afghan people. This starts with cutting corruption and power brokering to functional levels, and it means actually implementing Afghan economic reform plans rather than endlessly recycling new versions and stopping after declaring the intention to act. It means focusing Afghan reform plans on urgent popular needs and the fact this is likely to be a war that last for another half decade, and as well adopting other key reforms identified by bodies like the IMF and World Bank.

Imposing conditions on other states is scarcely popular with aid donors and even less so with recipients. However, the functional and ethical need to impose such conditions is too clear in the case of failed states like Afghanistan. What passes for non-interference leaves the nation’s people without support and buys time for failed regimes to make things worse.

If the U.S. decides to provide the levels of military support and civil support that reflect the actual conditions in the war, it needs to impose “conditionality” on an Afghan government and political structure that has kept Afghanistan the equivalent of a corrupt “failed state.” Indeed, the host country regime the U.S. and its allies are seeking to protect has become as much of a threat to creating a meaningful outcome to the fighting as the Taliban and other declared enemies.

**The Need for Strategic Triage**

The need for a successful U.S. intervention in Afghanistan should not be taken as a given. The U.S. should make an equally objective analysis of the impact of U.S. withdrawal at a time it has so many other strategic priorities, and the Afghan government presents so many problems. No commitment to a limited war should ever to be open-ended if the partner country is not ready to do its share, and strategic triage always should be a key part of U.S. planning.
As Hans Morgenthau pointed out decades ago – giving way to the American tendency to turn war into a moral crusade where the enemy is demonized and the ally’s limitations are ignored. The U.S. has many competing domestic needs and other strategic priorities. The U.S. should not withdraw if it can find a cost-effective way to win that matches the strategic value of an effort that is now taking place in a state at the margin of U.S. strategic interest and is no longer the center of a far broader terrorist threat.

As Robert Osgood also pointed out in the 1950s – at the height of the Cold War – limited wars are wars the U.S. can afford to leave or lose. A U.S. departure from Afghanistan would not materially impact global perceptions of a war that has already been too long and too uncertain for world opinion to see it as critical. There is also a reasonable chance that states like China and Russia would be forced to act, Pakistan could be ignored, and that Afghanistan would be caught up in internal power struggles that would keep any given extremist movement from becoming a major threat to the U.S. and its allies.

**The “Threat’ From U.S Politics**

Timing is already a critical issue. Ideally, the U.S. needs to make such changes as soon as possible. It is unclear, however, that further progress can be made under the Obama Administration. What is clear is that the Administration has other priorities and that it feels it has already taken steps that will make the Afghan War a legacy for the next President that will come to office in 2017. In spite of the debates of past years, Afghanistan is simply not a critical item on the present U.S. political agenda.

It is one of the many ironies of the current Presidential campaign that the United States is now involved in five wars: Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Three of these wars—Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria—involve serious U.S. military commitments that began in 2001, 2003, 2014 respectively, and all will clearly last far beyond the end of the Obama Administration. Yet, none of these wars has become the subject of serious policy discussion or debate in the 2016 campaigns, or a key focus of 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 focus on the Afghan war has been largely on how to cut the U.S. effort. The focus on Iraq, Syria, and Libya has been on defeating ISIS with no clear picture for what each 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 neighbors, or what will emerge in terms of terrorism or extremism once ISIS is driven out of its “caliphate” and dispersed. The focus in Yemen has been on helping the Saudi-UAE led coalition to defeat the Houthi-Saleh coalition and restore the “elected” government without any clear focus on what comes next.

If the U.S. is to be ready to take more effective action to support the Afghan forces and government in 2017, however, the key U.S. planners and analysts directly involved in the Afghan war need to act now, and look beyond the time-buying compromises that have been made to date. Action in Afghanistan has long lead times, and the U.S. has focused far too much on the military dimension of the conflict to the exclusion of taking effective action on the civil side.

The Congress also needs to change its approach as much as the Executive Branch. The Congress has failed to carry out its mission of properly evaluating how U.S. resources are being allocated
and spent, and official U.S. reporting on the war lacks a focus on effective action. If the U.S. is to be ready for more effective action in 2017, it needs to consider its options now as well as plans for change. It also needs to move from deadline-based efforts at the military level to conditions-based efforts and recognize that action on the civil side is urgent and means-making aid conditional on Afghan reform.
I. The Military Side of U.S. Strategy: Going from “Creeping Decrementalism” to Conditions-Based U.S. Support

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, 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:\footnote{1}

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.

Decremental Numbers Games

A report by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) issued in July 2016 provided a similar summary chronology of the President’s military “decrementalism.”\footnote{2}

On July 6, 2016, President Obama announced that the United States would maintain a presence of 8,400 U.S. troops in Afghanistan into 2017. This is a change from a previous plan to have only 5,500 troops there by the end of 2016…This quarter, DOD reported that 9,200 U.S. troops were serving in Afghanistan…On July 12, 2016, Resolute Support mission commander General John Nicholson told the media that, in addition to the 8,400 troops, 400 U.S. forces outside of Afghanistan will support NATO’s mission in Afghanistan and can be called forward if necessary…

The active combat role of U.S. forces in Afghanistan ended in December 2014. Their mission since then is training, advising and assisting the ANDSF and conducting counterterrorism missions. In June, President Obama also authorized them to assist the conventional ANDSF on the battlefield in certain circumstances.

Since the beginning of U.S. operations in Afghanistan, U.S. troop levels there have fluctuated. From 2002 to 2006, the number increased from 5,200 to 20,400. That number increased again to more than 30,000 U.S. troops in 2008…In December 2009, as troop levels in Iraq were decreasing, President Obama announced plans to deploy an additional 30,000 U.S. troops in an effort to “seize the initiative, while building the Afghan capacity that can allow for a responsible transition of our forces out of Afghanistan.” By June 2011, as the transition to Afghan-led security was beginning, more than 110,000 U.S. troops were serving in Afghanistan, as shown in Figure 3.27… That same month, President Obama announced plans to begin withdrawing troops—10,000 by the end of 2011 and 33,000 more by the following summer…

In May 2014, approximately 32,000 U.S. troops were serving in Afghanistan. At that time, President Obama announced that the U.S. combat mission in Afghanistan would end in 2014 and set out a timeline for U.S. troop withdrawal as security responsibility shifted to the Afghan government: U.S. forces would be reduced to approximately 9,800 by the beginning of 2015…That number would decline by half during 2015 with remaining U.S. forces being consolidated at Bagram Airfield and in Kabul. By the end of 2016, U.S. force strength would “be reduced to a normal embassy presence with a security-assistance component.” The first goal to
drawdown to 9,800 by the start of 2015 was met ahead of schedule; 9,500 U.S. troops were serving in Afghanistan as of December 20, 2014…

…DOD reported about 9,200 U.S. troops were serving in Afghanistan as of May 31, 2016. This was an increase of 350 over the 8,850 reported as of February 29, 2016. Of the 9,200, about 6,800 are U.S. forces supporting the RS train, advise, and assist mission. An additional 2,400 troops either conduct the U.S. counterterrorism mission or provide aviation, medical, logistical, and other enabler support for U.S. forces…According to NATO, 13,079 Coalition forces, including the 6,800 U.S. forces, are serving in Afghanistan as of July 8, 2016… During the joint press conference with Secretary Carter on July 12, 2016, addressing the new authorities and troop levels, General Nicholson said roughly 2,150 troops are to support counterterrorism missions, about 3,000 to support the RS mission, and about 3,300 troops will support or enable both missions.

The historical process of first building up and then seeking to withdraw U.S. forces is shown in Figure 1, along with U.S. spending on Afghan civil and security programs that were intended to allow Afghanistan to operate on its own. It is important to note that none of these changes in U.S. spending were ever explained in strategic terms in public reporting by the Department of Defense, Department of State, or USAID.

No serious attempt was made to tie the timing and scale of U.S. force withdrawal to stable plans for the build up and development of Afghan security forces, or to tie U.S. aid spending to specific goals to cope with the impact of U.S. withdrawal and ensure Afghan self-sufficiency.

Figure 1 does show that U.S. security aid did peak during the capitalization phase of the Afghan force build-up but was funded on an annual basis, and key security and aid programs showed little stability in funding and often in focus. Civil aid spending was largely program and project driven with no ties to clear longer-term goals or measures of effectiveness.

These spending levels also reflected considerable turbulence in the programs involved. Aid spending by major category often showed annual variations that were not tied to declared U.S. strategy and policy, or to any stable overall set of goals and measures of effectiveness. U.S. force levels were not only tied to deadlines rather than conditions, but they also were not tied to U.S. aid programs linked to these deadlines and the probable impact of U.S. withdrawals – except to point they had to be adjusted to annual conditions with any overall plan.³

Equally important, they have left a gap between the U.S. plans to withdraw its military support, and plans to provide continuing aid.

The same SIGAR report reference earlier noted that, ⁴

The Administration has asked Congress for $3.45 billion in fiscal year (FY) 2017 funding for the ANDSF. President Obama pledged in July to recommend his successor continue funding the ANDSF at or near current levels through 2020. At the Warsaw Summit July 8 and 9, 2016, the 30 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) nations pledged more than $800 million annually to sustain the Afghan security forces from 2018–2020.
Figure One: U.S. Troop and Spending Levels in Afghanistan 2002-2016

U.S. Troop Levels

![Graph showing U.S. troop levels from 2002 to 2016.](image)

Note: Troop strengths in 2002-2006 are CRS fiscal-year estimates. For 2009-2010 and 2012-2015, figures are as of October. Troop strength in 2011 is for July to show peak U.S. deployment.


Total U.S. Aid Levels

![Graph showing total U.S. aid levels from 2009 to 2016.](image)

Note: Numbers have been rounded. DOD reprogrammed $1 billion from FY 2011 ASFF, $1 billion from FY 2012 ASFF, and $1.78 billion from FY 2013 ASFF to fund other DOD OCO requirements. ASFF data reflects the following rescissions: $1 billion from FY 2012 in Pub. L. No. 113-6, $784.36 million from FY 2014 in Pub. L. No. 113-258, and $400 million from FY 2015 in Pub. L. No. 114-113. DOD transferred $1.2 billion from FY 2011 AIF, $175.5 million from FY 2013 AIF, and $53 million from FY 2014 AIF to the ESF for fund infrastructure projects implemented by USAID.

Source: SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, pp. 67
The President’s New U.S. Force Level of July 7, 2016: Is 8,400 Enough and What Does It Really Mean?

This history helps set the stage for the President’s most recent revisions to his plans to leave Afghanistan. A new set of Presidential and White House announcements was made in early July—less than a month after the President had talked about cutting to 5,500 U.S. personnel at the end of 2016—just before a key NATO meeting that would focus on the role of the alliance in Afghanistan.

The President made it clear 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 8,400.

Once the rhetoric is stripped away to expose the substance, the key portions of the President’s July 6th statement were strikingly similar to a White House background briefing 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, add a discussion of levels of progress in the Afghan civil sector that later parts of this analysis show 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.

Military Need or Reducing the Impact of Further U.S. Cuts on U.S. Allied Commitments

The intentions behind the President’s decisions to change his goals for U.S. forces in Afghanistan between June and July 2016 do seem to have been a partial shift from deadline-based strategy towards a conditions-based strategy. Furthermore, they did not come out of the blue or without consulting senior U.S. commanders.

The President made the decisions set forth in the June 10th White House background statement, and his partial reversal of that statement on July 6th, after General John Campbell, the previous commander in Afghanistan, 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 also publically supported the decision to keep forces in Afghanistan on June 15th, and stated 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

No Detailed Assessments

However, if one looks for the official rationale for the 8,400 figure – which was the only tangible change between June and July – it was never publically explained. The timing may have been driven largely by reviews of the situation by the Joint Staff and the U.S. commander in Afghanistan. But it is hard to ignore the fact that the United States could not make cuts to its
forces in Afghanistan without affecting the other states that provide Afghanistan with military and financial assistance. It is also hard to ignore the fact that a cut to 5,500 by the end of 2016 might well have led NATO and other allies to make similar reductions or even leave Afghanistan.

Secretary Carter noted this risk at the press conference mentioned earlier:7

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.”

This highlights another key aspect of shifting from a deadline-based military strategy to a conditions-based strategy. Keeping Allied force levels and aid contributions up is critical when U.S. forces are so low. The DoD Report for June 2016 noted 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).”8

The DoD report also showed the importance of their role by area:9

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, Jowzjan, Kunduz, Samangan, Sar-e Pul, and Takhar… However, current TAA efforts are limited primarily to the Mazar-e-Sharif area.

The U.S. cannot shift its burdens to its allies, but it needs them to continue to make an important contribution. It also needs to face the realities of time. The U.S. and its allies cannot leave and end their train and assist effort, and hope to see a stable Afghanistan emerge simply by sending aid money through 2020. Leaving the problem and then throwing money at it does not even amount to conscience money. It amounts to little more than a façade to cover an exit.

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

The U.S. has taken other actions than may amount to such a façade. Many key aspects of White House descriptions of the decisions that the President made in July 2016 were highly ambiguous. They still hinted at keeping the U.S. effort at minimal level and moving toward further force cuts, but they also left the President the option of making further delays in cutting U.S. forces and
involving more of the Americans to play a role in combat—although without actually calling it combat: 10

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 were also so ambiguous that they failed to declare the number of Americans that were still providing combat support to Afghan forces. The President can 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 also left the President enough latitude to keep U.S. military support at levels that could be too low to really be effective. They still presented a serious risk of have to leave Afghanistan after a de facto defeat as the equivalent of a “poison chalice” for his successor—a war lost through inadequate U.S. support before the new President takes office. They could—to paraphrase T.S. Elliot—still end the war with a whimper, rather than a bang.
II. “Transparency” or “Fog of Spin”

Like virtually every Administration before it, the Obama Administration seems to have a serious problem in distinguishing between transparency and fog. All of its major decisions regarding “creeping incrementalism” have been made with little real transparency and with far too little public data to explain what the key aspects of the U.S. effort were or what they were accomplishing. In fact, there often seemed to be a deliberate effort to avoid any details that might lead to serious Congressional or public examination of the overall level of U.S. efforts, and of what levels might actually meet the needs imposed by actual warfighting in Afghanistan.

The June 2016 review came and went without the White House providing any serious transparency as to the details of the assessment or other analysis that helped shape the President’s decision, the probable real world impact of reducing the U.S. troop presence versus the need to increase it, the amount of U.S. air support that was required, or the composition and combat role of the U.S. forces that were needed.

The President’s, White House, or the Secretary’s statements and decisions did not include a meaningful assessment of the combat situation in Afghanistan. There was no mention of its deteriorating political structure and quality of governance, of the impact of its gross corruption and failed reform, or of what the World Bank and IMF had warned was a growing economic crisis.

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

A Lack of Meaningful Department of Defense Reporting

The Department of Defense did little better at the time, although it provided some added details in the June 2016 edition of its semi-annual report on the Afghan conflict, which is called Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan. The State Department and USAID continued to avoid any mention of their goals and operations on 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 was little more than a summary of vague U.S. goals, coupled with 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.

The closest the DoD report came to actually “looking ahead” was equally vague and anodyne: 13

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.

The limits to transparency have also grown over time. DoD attempts to report on the war have been steadily cut back over time, and the end result is that it has become progressively harder to assess every aspect of U.S. aid efforts. Virtually all of the potentially embarrassing metrics on the fighting, governance, and development are gone. There is no longer any discussion of the civil 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 likewise gone.

Limits to SIGAR and Lead Inspector General Reporting

There are only a few additional official U.S. reports on the Afghan war, and the two main ones have severe limits from a strategic perspective. The first such report is the quarterly reports of the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction to Congress. SIGAR, however, does not have the mission of assessing the need for overall levels of U.S. combat support, or the size and effectiveness of the U.S. forces and aid efforts in Afghanistan, although SIGAR does often some useful data in these areas.

Similarly, the newer Quarterly Reports of the Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom’s Sentinel often do little more than summarize U.S. command reporting on the threat and the course of the war. The March 2016 report explained its coverage by stating that:14

In order to describe the environment prevailing during OFS, this report first examines evolving threats faced by the ANDSF, describes significant combat developments, and summarizes Afghan-led efforts to reach a peace accord with insurgent groups during the second quarter of FY 2016. This leads into a discussion of U.S. support for the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission, an assessment of ANDSF capabilities based on information provided by commanders in Afghanistan, and an analysis of U.S. funding for OFS and related missions that totaled $55 billion for FY 2015 and $42 billion for FY 2016.

Some of the narrative in the first section of the report is based on information obtained from credible media sources because they offer timely accounts of events in Afghanistan during the quarter and supplement material available from government sources. The second section describes Lead IG activities and oversight projects completed during the first half of FY 2016, while the third section summarizes ongoing and planned projects.

The March 2016 Lead Inspector General report did warn that the threat had the same seriousness as the DoD report and the U.S. command in Afghanistan. It also provided data and graphs on
UN reports regarding a rise in civilian casualties. However, the Lead Inspector General reports have not been delivered on schedule. As of the Quarterly reports of the Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom’s Sentinel from March 31, 2015 – they also have not assessed the role or adequacy of either the U.S. military or security efforts, and do not address the lack of and need for integrated interagency plans, milestones, and measures of effectiveness.

Like the DoD and SIGAR reports, there are almost 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 specific detail that is provided is drawn from a media report that does not cover the Taliban or other insurgents, and is not validated, and may or may not be correct:

In an April 2016 media interview, Brigadier General Charles Cleveland, who recently assumed duties as Deputy Chief of Staff for Communications, NATO Resolute Support, stated that U.S. forces and NATO allies conducted nearly 100 counterterrorism strikes in Afghanistan this quarter, primarily targeting IS-K and al Qaeda fighters. As a result of those strikes, he estimated that the number of IS-K terrorists were now at “the lower end” of the 1,000–3,000 range.

The end result is that it is extremely difficult to address the issue of how much active combat and combat support assistance the Afghan forces need from the United States and is allies. As is discussed in more detail later in this report, the closest the U.S. came to officially admitting the size of its continuing combat role in supporting Afghan forces came from a SIGAR report that stated that the U.S. did have a roughly 2,150 person counterterrorism mission directed against the nine terrorist groups in the area, 3,000 doing advising, and 3,300 that enable both advising and counterterrorism. These figures, however, made no effort to distinguish between the rough number involved in ground combat and combat support and those providing combat airpower.

None of the three U.S. government reports on the Afghan war – the DoD, SIGAR, or Lead Inspector General reports – address the civil side of the insurgency, the impact of Afghan government civil failures on the course of the fighting, the success or failure of U.S. civil aid in either affecting the war or meeting broader Afghan civil needs, or any other broader aspect of the critical civil dimension of a war that is fought as much on a political, ideological, and economic level as a tactical one.

This is particularly striking in the case of the Lead Inspector General reports. Although the report is co-signed by the Inspector Generals of the Department of Defense, Department of State, and USAID, it is only intended to address Afghan forces and countersecurity efforts, not the civil side of the war, the role U.S. forces plan in combat and combat support, or the adequacy of the Afghan security effort except as stated by the U.S. command.

**Failing to Meaningfully Assess the Threat**

The U.S. has also steadily cut back in providing any meaningful official reporting on the size and gains by the insurgent threat of the kind needed to assess the need for U.S. support of Afghan forces.
Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks

The one remaining combat metric that was still in the DoD report issued in June 2016 consisted of largely meaningless charts on “Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks”—which ignored UN and other reporting on the rise in civilian casualties and the steady expansion of insurgents in existing and new areas.19

These charts are shown in Figure 2, and they tacitly assume that the Taliban, Haqqani Network, ISIS and other insurgents have to win by directly attacking Afghan forces rather than gaining influence, producing casualties rather than changing Afghan government and forces behavior, controlling territory, using terrorism, and seizing areas and forcing the Afghan forces to then attack them. As the DoD report notes, the data involved are also very uncertain.20

At the same time, the text of the DoD report did make it clear that the risk level in Afghanistan had become all too high.21

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 attacks 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.
**Figure 2: Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks in Afghanistan**

Looking Beyond Tactical Metrics

The DoD report did not analyze or map the patterns in insurgent influence and control, a critical political dimension in any insurgency. Nor did it address the level of effective government control versus power broker and insurgent influence and control, which is even more critical. It skimmed over the problems of corruption, desertions/absentees, and effective management of the Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior.

The official U.S. data that was available often seemed sharply contradictory. The July 30, 2016 Quarterly Report by SIGAR warned that that:22

…The ANDSF have struggled to respond to the Taliban’s growing national presence. There has been particularly stiff resistance in provinces along the border with Pakistan, such as Helmand, Kandahar, and Nangarhar, with reports that 68.5% of security incidents occur in southern, south-eastern, and eastern Afghanistan.154 Many of the issues preventing the ANDSF from properly engaging the Taliban relate to deficiencies in key areas such as command and control, leadership, logistics, and overall coordination. High attrition rates, including high casualty rates, continue to make the sustainability of the ANDSF a major concern and priority for leadership. (p. 85)

…USFOR-A reports that approximately 65.6% of the country’s districts are under Afghan government control or influence as of May 28, 2016, a decrease from the 70.5% reported as of January 29, 2016.165 Of the 407 districts within the 34 provinces, 268 districts were under government control or influence, 36 districts (8.8%) within 15 provinces were under insurgent control or influence, and 104 districts (25.6 %) were “at risk.”166 Of the 36 districts under insurgent control or influence, nine districts with a population of 524,072 are under insurgent control and 27 districts with a population of 1.98 million are under insurgent influence…According to Afghan media, the MOI spokesman reported that more than 50 (12.3%) of the country’s districts face serious threats from insurgents, with nine out of the government’s control as of June 28, 2016. Those districts include four in Helmand, two in Badakhshan, and one each in Ghazni, Sar-e Pul, and Zabul Provinces.171 Afghan media also reported the Ghazni police chief claims the Taliban have suicide-bomber and motor-bomb training centers in the Nawa district of Ghazni. (p. 86)

General John W. Nicholson, commander, Resolute Support and United States Forces-Afghanistan provided only a marginally more reassuring assessment – but gave different figures on the scale of Taliban control – in a press briefing on July 28, 2016:23

…we can discuss in greater detail, you know, which territory is controlled versus which territory they have a presence in. So we -- we would, sort of, estimate that the Taliban would have a presence in maybe a third of the country. But in terms of actual control, we think 10 districts out of the 400 where they actually would have what we would call control. There's other districts where they have some influence, where they have a greater degree of presence. But again, this is being contested.

One thing to understand about the Afghan campaign plan in ’16 versus 2015 is that after 2015, learning from the operations last year, the Afghans decided to concentrate their effort in key parts of the country.

So, as I mentioned in my opening statement, they started in the Kunduz area, with the necessity to defend that from the Taliban. They did that successfully in the April/May timeframe and inflicted heavy causalities on the Taliban up there, and in fact prevented him from seizing Kunduz again. Though we still see a presence in the northern districts, north of Kunduz, as an example Archi District and so forth up there. But again, they don't control the district centers and they don't control the provincial capital.

So this kind of gives you a sense of the nature of the Taliban presence and the degree of control. They’re largely in rural areas -- in the villages and rural areas, but not in the district centers and in none of the provincial capitals.

Now, what we see down in the south is somewhat similar, but I should mention we assess the Taliban have been disrupted by the death of Mullah Mansour that occurred on the 21st of May, and that this disruption,
even though they would like us to believe that they recovered from this quickly, they appointed their new leader Haibatullah within one week.

But in fact, many of the tensions that existed in the Taliban under Mansour have, if anything, been exacerbated further with the rapid succession of Haibatullah. So this rapid succession process was not very inclusive, many of the Taliban leaders who were not in support of Mansour, or remain unsupportive of Haibatullah. We also see evidence that Mansour had misdirected a lot of the Taliban revenues for his own purposes. And in fact, since his death, because of his tight control over Taliban finances, in fact, the Taliban are having trouble getting control of their own finances.

So this disruption of finances, disruption amongst the leadership, the fact that the Taliban fighters are fighting and dying inside Afghanistan, while their leaders are living in sanctuary and safety elsewhere, all of this has undermined the cohesion and the effectiveness of the Taliban.

Now, this doesn't mean that they won't be able to conduct high profile attacks, they won't be able to conduct isolated attacks. We fully expect to see more of that this year. But what they have been unable to do is to seize and hold any terrain. And we think that the end of 2015, after their brief success in Kunduz, they believed they were going to be able to seize and hold terrain, and they failed to do so.

So this -- this fight is not over, but I would say that we're cautiously optimistic. The Afghan security forces are on a positive trajectory in going after the Taliban. This all fits within President Ghani's approach of fight, fracture, talk.

The importance of more accurate data in analyzing the need for U.S. conditions-based military support is illustrated in graphic form in the wildly conflicting parts of Figure 3, which compares different estimates and indicators of the threat level over time in map and graphic form. No consensus emerges, but it is all too clear that non-U.S. sources show far more serious levels of enemy threat activity than indicators like Effective Enemy Initiated Attacks and the text in official DoD reporting.

The same is true of the UN casualty data, which continued to show a rise during the first half of 2016:24

A UN report on Afghanistan ... shows a record number of civilian casualties since counting began in 2009, with 5,166 civilians recorded killed or maimed in just the first six months of this year, of whom almost one-third were children. The total civilian casualty figure recorded by the UN between 1 January 2009 and 30 June 2016 has risen to 63,934, including 22,941 deaths and 40,993 injured.

Between January and June this year, the Human Rights team of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) documented 1,601 civilian deaths and 3,565 injured civilians. This represents an increase of four percent in the total number of casualties compared to the first six months of 2015 – and is the highest half-year total since 2009.

This year’s casualties include 1,509 children (388 dead and 1,121 injured) – a figure the UN Human Rights Chief described as “alarming and shameful,” particularly as it represents the highest numbers of children killed or wounded in a six-month period since counting began in 2009.

There were also 507 women casualties (130 killed and 377 injured). The figures are conservative – almost certainly underestimates – given the strict methodology employed in their documentation and in determining the civilian status of those affected.

The Secretary-General’s Special Representative for Afghanistan and head of UNAMA Tadamichi Yamamoto stressed that the report must serve as a call to action by parties to the conflict “to do all they can to spare civilians from the horrors of war.”

“Every single casualty documented in this report – people killed while praying, working, studying, fetching water, recovering in hospitals – every civilian casualty represents a failure of commitment and should be a call to action for parties to the conflict to take meaningful, concrete steps to reduce civilians’ suffering and increase protection,” Yamamoto said. “Platitudes not backed by meaningful action ring hollow over time.
History and the collective memory of the Afghan people will judge leaders of all parties to this conflict by their actual conduct.”

At the same time, no public official analysis has ever been provided on the role of Pakistan and its Inter Service Intelligence (ISI) in supporting the Taliban and Haqqani network, although Congressional legislation now threatened to sharply cut U.S. aid to Pakistan for this reason. The DoD report of June 30, 2016 largely dodged the issue by stating:

The Afghanistan-Pakistan border region remains a sanctuary for various groups. These include the Taliban, al Qaeda, AQIS, the Haqqani Network, Lashkar-e Tayyiba, Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan, IS-K, and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. This sanctuary and these groups remain a security challenge for both countries and pose a threat to regional stability and security. In particular, security in Kunar Province deteriorated over the previous few months due to a series of recent attacks and limited ANDSF presence along the province’s 160 mile-long border with Pakistan.

The Afghan government’s relationship with Pakistan remains a critical aspect of enhancing security and stability in Afghanistan. Since the beginning of President Ghani’s tenure, leaders from both countries have made a concerted effort to improve relations and better address mutual security interests, such as the threat from various extremist groups that reside in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region. At the December 2015 Heart of Asia Conference in Islamabad, Pakistan, President Ghani and Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif reaffirmed their commitment to Taliban peace talks. Although some of the tensions from the second half of 2015 have abated with the resumption of bilateral dialogue, the results of this dialogue have been mixed.

Pakistan’s ongoing counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and other areas reduce some militant groups’ ability to use Pakistani territory as a safe haven for terrorism and a base of support for the insurgency in Afghanistan. Additionally, Pakistani military clearing operations in the FATA have increased military presence on both sides of Afghanistan and Pakistan’s shared border. Addressing the challenge of militant safe havens in the border region requires greater transparency and cooperation among RS and the Afghan and Pakistani militaries to avoid misunderstandings as well as to prevent displaced militant groups from relocating into Afghan territory.

Despite some obstacles to a stronger bilateral relationship, such as intermittent cross-border firing incidents during this reporting period, Afghanistan and Pakistan maintain regular contact at the most senior levels of government and within the military. RS advisors continue to leverage the ability of the coalition to encourage more robust bilateral communication at all levels through the Tripartite Joint Operations Center. Military-to-military engagements this reporting period trended positively, although they remain vulnerable to setbacks.
Figure Three: Comparative Metrics of Threat Activity in Afghanistan- Part One

German Government Map of Threat Levels from Anti-Government Forces: 11/2014


UN OHCA Estimate of Areas of Risk in Afghanistan: 9/2015

- More than half of the districts in Afghanistan are rated by the United Nations as having either a substantial, high or extreme level of risk.

- Districts with extreme threat levels either have no government presence at all, or a government presence reduced to only the district capital; there were 38 such districts scattered through 14 of the country’s 34 provinces.

- In all, 27 of Afghanistan’s 34 provinces had some districts where the threat level was rated high or extreme.

Figure Three: Comparative Metrics of Threat Activity in Afghanistan - Part Two

UN OHCA Estimate of IDPs As a Conflict Indicator: 9/2015

The conflict in Afghanistan continues to intensify, with notable escalations in violence seen throughout the North, South and East Regions. Farah, Kandahar, Kunduz and Nangarhar experienced large-scale displacement within and to surrounding provinces. During the quarter, approximately 63,500 individuals were recorded as conflict-induced, with the total assessed number of forcibly displaced in 2015 reaching 197,000 by the end of September. One trauma care NGO reported a 30 per cent increase in war-related admissions. The increasing violence culminated with the significant, yet temporary, siege of the provincial capital Kunduz by non-state armed groups (NSAG) at the end of September, which led to a month-long displacement crisis of nearly the entire city’s population across the North and North East Regions.

As military operations in North West Pakistan continued and expanded, refugees remain in the camps and urban areas of Khart and Pahole provinces. Families do not expect to be able to return home in the foreseeable future, thus requiring a focus on more medium-term interventions while still meeting life-saving needs of the most vulnerable.

At the same time, the return of both documented and undocumented Afghans remains high, with nearly 54,000 registered refugees returning from the United States in the first nine months of 2015, as compared to only 13,860 in Q3.

Undocumented returnees have also reached higher levels, with nearly 140,000 people returning, 80,000 of which are considered particularly vulnerable. The number of vulnerable families and persons with specific needs is also increasing, all of which is also increasing, all of which is increasingly challenging for a worsening humanitarian situation in the country and limited capacity to respond.
Figure Three: Comparative Metrics of Threat Activity in Afghanistan - Part Three

Institute for the Study of War Estimate: August 28, 2016
Figure Four: Comparative Metrics of Threat Activity in Afghanistan - Part Four


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Figure Three: Comparative Metrics of Threat Activity in Afghanistan - Part Five

Civilians Deaths and Injuries
January to December 2009 - 2015

Civilians Deaths and Injuries by region
January to December 2009 - 2015

The Need for Net Assessments, A Family of Metrics, and Making Such Assessments a Key Part of the Train and Assist Mission

It is hard to dismiss the probability that many of the problems in today’s official assessments of the war in Afghanistan are driven by a political desire to present favorable data. This seems to be done for a wide range of reasons: the desire to report success on the part of commands, efforts to promote continued support of the ANSF, efforts at morale building, and White House driven efforts to defend current policy decisions about the scale of the U.S. military effort and keeping the goal of steady withdrawals. Chronic over-classification is another reason, as is the desire for some form of false precision and to oversimplify the real-world complexities of the war.

The U.S. should have learned conclusively in Vietnam – if not in its previous counterinsurgency campaigns in Central America and the Philippines -- that none of these reasons are a way to win a war. Focusing on the tactical dimension of an insurgency means ignoring or understating the importance of the political, social, ideological, and economic factors that are at least half the war, as is discussed in more depth later in this analysis. It also means ignoring the reality that serious insurgencies arise when governments fail to serve substantial parts of their population, and the host country(ies) become a “threat” whose failures drive the insurgency and feed it regardless of tactical victories.

Even at the local or battalion level -- and certainly at the level of local government and policing – it is critical to establish the level of popular support for the host country government and the insurgents, the causes and grievances involved, and to try to find political, governance economic, and ideological answers to support the military effort. Such efforts then become progressively more important at higher levels of command and governance when the war is evaluated on the basis of broad sectarian, ethnic, tribal, and regional differences that have a major impact on popular support and loyalty.

This is particularly true when governments such as the government of Afghanistan are grossly corrupt, driven by self-seeking power brokers, have strong elements of independent political control over government forces or their own paramilitaries, and fail to make the kind of basic reforms in governance and economic, policies necessary to deal with the failures outlined later in this analysis.

Pretending a host country government has broad legitimacy it has not earned -- and is not earning -- is a dangerous illusion. This is even truer when an effort is made to claim levels of effectiveness and success for the military, police, and security forces that do not really exist. Virtually all major insurgencies provide a consistent historical warning: governments do as much to defeat themselves through denial and believing their own illusions – instead of meeting their people’s needs -- as a result the actions of the insurgents they fight.

Governments do not need to achieve perfection, but they do need to meet the basic expectations, of their peoples, and show they are trying to deal with their worst grievances. “Strategic communications” also becomes a vacuous oxymoron when key elements of the population have to live with the government’s failures, corruption, inability to provide security, and discrimination against them on a day-to-day basis.

These are realities that should drive U.S. strategy and actions in Afghanistan at every level—as they should in cases like Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Unless a vital U.S. strategic commitment is involved, the level of U.S. support should be tailored to how well the host
country government deals with the full range of operational realities that shape the counterinsurgency campaign.

Furthermore, many of these realities do not lend themselves to reliable metrics. They cannot be quantified in wartime with even to the extent that tools like polling can ever do so. They require both judgment and the use of a wide range of often conflicting metrics. The data in Figure 3 are an example, but so are maps and charts that reflect expert intelligence judgments about the level of security in given Districts and population centers, judgments about the level of corruption and misgovernment, levels of functional traditional and formal justice, trends in income and poverty, availability of key government services like medicine and education, and levels of government spending and aid. These are the kind of metrics dropped from U.S. government reporting as the security situation deteriorated after 2006.

They also are all areas where it is generally possible to make broad judgments and flag key weaknesses and problems even if there are no clear ways to generate quantifiable metrics as inputs. In fact, in many cases, no amount of metrics can eliminate the need for judgment and overreliance on metrics as a substitute can do more harm than good.

This focus is particularly important because of the tendency to seek nation-wide comparable data and analysis rather than focus on identifying key problems areas and address special risks and problems. Data will still be lacking in such areas, but addressing key problems in specific areas with tailored data sets is often far easier than generating national assessments which include wide areas that do have a given problems

One key example of the weaknesses in generic and force-wide metrics is the search for quantifiable readiness metrics on force-wide basis for the Afghan Army – metrics designed largely for generating new forces or comparing them in peacetime when what counts is the effectiveness in war of the key elements of the ANSF order of battle in actually fighting – performance which often does not relate to quantifiable “input” metrics in any way.

Another example is measuring force wide attrition as if meeting a given total authorized strength was a key total rather than generating and retaining experienced fighters in key units. Few measurements have been so consistently irrelevant in determining the outcome of battle and war than gross manpower totals.

The challenge is not accurate quantification. It is focusing on the key areas where judgment is needed. Making the best judgments possible in each area while stating the limits to the judgment and where useful data are available, and focusing on the judgments that can actually help win.

It is equally important to identify and map key areas of ignorance. One useful example is work done in aid and humanitarian relief workers in like Syria who draw maps of the many areas where no data exist to determine the need for aid. This helps correct the normal approach that is to estimate total national aid requirements in spite of the lack of data, rather than focus on key problem areas.

One critical aspect of indications and warning in an insurgency is knowing where the gaps in data exist, and how important they in terms of their strategic value and population. Explicitly estimating and accepting uncertainty is a key part of every aspect of analyzing public policy and particularly in war. The officer or official who cannot live with the fact the “fog of war” is an inevitable aspect of most planning and operations – and that it is as important to understand the density of the “fog” as any other aspect of war -- is a dangerous jackass.
At the same time, the fact the U.S. cannot collect critical data because it no longer provides advisors in critical areas provides a much broader warning that a critical aspect of the train and assist effort has been inadequate and lacked a critical focus. The U.S. had years of warning that it would need Afghan reporting once U.S. advisors left. By and large, it chose to go blind by default.

The U.S. and other outside advisors now need to make helping the ANSF and Afghan civil officials develop realistic data and assessment methods a critical priority, and resource the necessary aid and expertise. They also need to make providing adequate host country reporting a key aspect of the conditionality that is the focus of the rest of this analysis. Throwing money and military resources into the void serves no one’s interest.

Tact and patience are required to help host country forces and governments develop the right reporting tools and develop honest inputs and uses for the data. Aid, however, is leverage and so is the right mix of advisory criticism and praise. Simply allowing the Afghan military, police, or key civil elements to fail to report or fail to provide adequate data does not build morale, it leads to failure. Similarly security classification is pointless when the threat often knows more about the weaknesses and strengths of the force than the MoD or MoI. Transparency and public exposure are a key form of leverage and peer pressure.

The Afghans badly need to learn how to hold themselves accountable, and U.S. reporting on key failures can have a major impact in both pushing them to correct key problems and improve their own reporting and leadership. So can pushing them into being explicit about identifying their data sources and its quality, their methods of analysis, and the probable range of uncertainty.

Far too often, they now generate data that lack real sources and report success in ways that lack credibility. This is more common on the civil side – and has often been tacitly encouraged so the U.S. country team could report such “success.”

Afghan honesty will always be relative, but there has to be enough to win. And here, the various efforts of the inspector generals should be as critical of U.S. officials and officials who fail to understand this as they are of the Afghans. The U.S. military advisory effort and Embassy should be held fully accountable.
III. The Future Role of U.S. Forces: Shifting to a Conditions-Based Strategy

Better analysis, however, is no substitute for better strategy and policy. If the U.S. is to help the Afghan government achieve any meaningful form of victory, it must focus on providing the resources needed to win, rather than making slow, incremental shifts in the deadlines for withdrawal. The lack of meaningful data and reliable assessments makes it difficult to judge exactly what shifts and increases in the U.S. military effort are needed, but there do seem to be enough data to indicate that the military challenges require relatively limited changes in the U.S. effort to enable the Afghan forces to succeed, and not major deployments of ground or air forces.

Even if the present administration does not act, there also still seems to be time for the new Administration to act before the 2017 campaign season in Afghanistan -- although it would clearly be better if the U.S. acted more quickly and decisively. There is always the risk that the Taliban and other insurgents could take a major territorial center or exploit a political crisis, and as the war in Iraq has shown, it is far better and easier to defend an objective than it is try to recover and liberate one.

These conclusions do need confirmation in the form of a realistic net assessment of Afghan government capabilities relative to the threat, and one designed to honestly compare the real state of Afghan capabilities relative to the Taliban and other threats, rather than assume the government’s faults and shortcomings. The official U.S. approach to the war has consistently failed to do this, focusing on the threat and assuming government progress. As a result the following comments must be interpreted in the light of the urgent need for such a “zero-based” analysis that compares the real world prospects for the Afghan government against the threat and examines the full range of civil-military forces shaping the war.

Mission One: Train and Assist, But Size the Effort to the Need and Conditions on the Ground

The key test of the feasibility of an effective U.S. effort will be that the outcome of such an analysis will show there is a high probability that the U.S. and its allies can succeed without reintroducing major ground combat units. To put it bluntly, such an option is not politically feasible and Afghanistan is not worth a return to level of effort relative to other U.S. strategic interests. War is not a morality play, and the U.S. needs to be realistic about strategic triage and making hard choices. It cannot “rebalance” the world, and the nations it aids must understand that there are conditions for U.S. support and the U.S. does not make open-ended commitments.

Assuming that such a net assessment indicates that the deployment of major ground forces is not necessary, one key step will be for the U.S. to create a “train and assist” force that has the strength and structure to fully do the job. As has already been discussed, neither the June 10th background statement nor the President’s July 7th statement provided much detail on the future role that 8,400 or 5,500 U.S. forces would play.

The June 2016 version of the DoD report only provided the following information on future U.S. force levels:27

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 Kandahar Province in the south.

**How Much is Enough?**

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

The totals that the U.S. does report also seem uncertain and contradictory. The total number the DoD reported as actually assigned to NATO was 8,179. General Nicholson provided what seemed to be lower totals in a conference with Secretary Carter on July 12, 2016, again highlighting how little real public transparency existed regarding even the most basic details of the U.S. effort:  

So, as the President said in his statement, I put a fresh set of eyes on -- on the issue and the three bins, if you will, of troops as you've heard. We have our counter-terrorism forces, which are here focused on our counterterrorism mission against the nine terrorist groups that are in the area. Those number roughly 2,150. We have our troops doing advising, so they number around 3,000. And then we have our troops that enable both of the other missions, they enable both advising and counterterrorism. And there number about 3,300.

So some capabilities, we put over the horizon. And that's some hundreds of service members in a variety of enabling capacities. But I'm very comfortable with them being where they are and we can call them forward if necessary, or we can reach back for support. And so this enables us then to be able to perform the mission at the FML that we have.

So, again, our two missions, counterterrorism; and train, advise, assist; enabled by our pool of enablers and I'm very comfortable with this, that -- that we're going to be able to accomplish both of those missions with this -- with this level of manning. And it provides me all the capabilities I need to get the job done.

So if you take the 3,000 advisers, the 3,300 enablers, that gives you 6,300. And then there's 400 of those troops that are over the horizon that count against our NATO contribution because of the nature of what they do.

**The Key Train and Assist Roles that Should Be Provided**

To put these figures in perspective, a senior USCENTCOM officer indicated on background that some 13,000 to 15,000 personnel were needed in the period before the President fixed on 9,800. What is really critical, however, is to provide a total that can meet conditions-based requirements. The 8,400 number seems to be a political figure designed to transfer the war to the next Administration without any zero-based review of what is actually needed or considering any requirement that might call for additional manpower.
The 8,400 total also seems to be the absolute minimum the administration felt it could advance at the time for political reasons and one that will provide too few personnel for what is called the train and assist mission. The U.S. should have learned from past wars that it needs to have small cadres of advisors deployed forward in combat units, and a chain of such teams at every key link between the high command and units down to the Kandak or battalion level. The problems with relatively new forces is a combination of factors ranging from a lack of cadres with the proper combat experience to the need to ensure that requirement for reinforcement resupply are both validated and met on a timely basis.

Poor Afghan officers and key officials need to be identified and good ones promoted. Corruption and internal ethnic, sectarian, and tribal tensions need to be monitored. Calls for U.S. and Afghan air support need to be validated, and forward units need to be rotated and given time to retrain and recover.

Political and power broker interference needs to be monitored and kept within limits. This can only be done with the kind of situational awareness and networking that looks far beyond training in the rear, and takes account of the real world limits to host country forces in “failed states” from the top down. As key parts of the June 2016 DoD report indicate, these remain key problems in Afghan Army forces that the U.S. effort must find ways to address.

The need for this level of train and assist mission support does seem to be lessons the U.S. has increasingly come to accept in Iraq, although it has not actually provided the advisory teams at the battalion levels that some U.S. officers publically stated would be deployed. In contrast, U.S. military spokespersons have said on background that even 9,800 personnel were too limited to provide adequate teams for all of the Afghan Army corps, and there is no indication in DoD public reporting of what level of deployment exists in the Afghan Police and Afghan Local Police.

The DoD semiannual report for June 2016 also seemed to make it clear that the U.S. and allied elements in the various Train Assist and Advise Commands were 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.30 Any total that cannot adequately cover every Corps is already far too low to cover Afghan combat units or “Kandaks” and key elements of the police.

Afghan forces almost certainly need more train and assist personnel rather than the current 8,400 limit or the previous 9,800 limit, and no further cuts should be made until it is fully clear Afghan forces are properly ready. No matter how the total Manning figure is broken out, the June 2016 DoD report also seems to almost deliberate dodge around the reality that any near-term future cuts to levels around 5,500 would make things worse for both the combat and combat support parts of the train and assist mission: 31

… 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.

The DoD report also indicated that at least some U.S. train and assist personnel already had minimal contact with Afghan combat forces in the field.32

Military and civilian advisors work with their Afghan counterparts on three levels of advising:

- **Level One**: Advisors work with their Afghan counterparts on a continuous, persistent (usually daily) basis from either an embedded footprint or in close proximity.
- **Level Two**: Advisors work with their Afghan counterparts on a less frequent basis (determined by commanders) to ensure their continued development. The frequency of this interaction varies based on the proximity to and capability of their Afghan counterpart, the threat level to advisors, and coalition resources.
- **Level Three**: Advisors are no longer co-located with their Afghan counterparts and train, advise, and assist their Afghan counterparts from a centralized location. Expeditionary advising teams and visits are planned and coordinated with Afghan counterparts to assist periodically in terms of operations and sustainment.

U.S. and coalition advisors focus the TAA mission within the MoD and MoI on generating, employing, and sustaining capabilities within the ANDSF, with advising extending down to the ANA corps, ANP zone, and Afghan Border Police (ABP) headquarters levels. Whereas the previous ISAF mission focused primarily on combat operations with a secondary focus on generating, training, and equipping the ANDSF and building ministry capacity, ministry capacity-building efforts are the main effort for RS.

Moreover, providing U.S. train and assist aid to the Afghan military is only part of the requirement to develop effective Afghan security forces. 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 the MoI oversees it, 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%.
A Zero-Based Review of the Requirement Focused on Actual Warfighting Capability: Army

There should be a zero-based review of these issues that does not assume that the present numbers of personnel and other resources are adequate, and that the goal is to keep cutting them regardless of the risk. It should fully examine what level of U.S. effort is actually needed in the train and assist mission, and this analysis should be public and transparent and detailed enough to be convincing. It should be validated in meaningful and probing Congressional hearings and the focus should be on winning and not keeping U.S. casualties to a minimum regardless of the end result.

It is also long past time to focus on what parts of the Afghan order of battle are actually effective in combat, rather than on formal effectiveness ratings of the entire force, or that focus on resources and abstract measures of readiness rather than actual combat performance. The bulk of U.S. and allied forces have now been gone for nearly two years, and the real challenge has never been force generation, or meeting force wide metrics of various forms of “square bashing.” Yet, the effectiveness data on Afghan forces in DoD and Inspector General reports, however, still consists almost solely of broad categories of peacetime readiness that do not define a wartime mission or focus explicitly on combat capability.33

The still developing Afghan Air Force (AAF) is discussed in the next section because it is years away from the size and capability that is needed, and so closely linked to the need for active U.S. air support. At present, it is the Afghan National Army (ANA) and various elements of the Afghan Police that are the critical elements in sizing the U.S. train and assist mission.

The various U.S. government reports on Afghan Army capabilities only report broad areas of progress, not progress in creating an effective order of battle that is proven in combat. Most media and independent analytic reports also are far more critical. At the same time, the DoD June 2016 report does indicate that actual Army Manning remains about 12-13% below the 195,000 force goal, and other portions of the report note that:34

The ANDSF’s need to reset key components of the force during the winter highlights the persistent capability gaps in critical areas and in the non-combat enabling and ministerial functions that support them. Areas of improvement for the ANDSF include maneuver capability, maintaining operational readiness, cross-pillar coordination and cooperation, and the need to increase offensive, intelligence-driven operations to seize and retain the initiative from the insurgency. One of the drivers of the ANDSF’s overreliance on both combat and non-combat enablers is the ANDSF’s systemic challenges with sustainment at all levels. ANDSF logistics nodes continue to suffer from shortfalls in logistics systems and processes due to human capital limitations as well as a reluctance to transition from legacy to more modern systems. In addition, resource management and personnel management processes remain areas for further development that could positively affect the force’s operational capability.

Leadership: ANDSF leadership remains a key concern for the MoD, the MoI, and the coalition. RS officials continue to emphasize that effective and accountable leadership is the only way to ensure that the ANDSF continue to improve and that gains are sustained. The selection, placement, and empowerment of the right military and civilian leadership within the security ministries are essential to ANDSF success. At the ministerial level, delays in resource management and strategic planning processes due to leadership challenges hinder the MoD and MoI’s ability to support the ANDSF. Moreover, senior leaders often still intervene on tactical and operational-level issues to compensate for leadership shortcomings at the lower levels.

Deficient leadership hinders ANA and ANP unit performance. Leadership remains uneven across the force with some ANA corps, such as the 205th and 215th, continuing to replace leaders this reporting period and a wide variance in leadership effectiveness across ANP pillars and the
Operations: Progress on conducting combined arms operations is uneven, and aerial fires remain a capability gap. The ANDSF requires continued coalition support to incorporate capabilities such as D-30 artillery fires effectively to alleviate the reliance on U.S. aerial fires, better integrate organic aerial fires into operations with the use of ATACs, and develop their organic ISR and ISR enabler capabilities. Despite the continued integration of MD-530s and the addition of A-29s this reporting period, AAF organic aerial fires capability will remain a gap in the near term.

The recently established police zone headquarters have helped to address cross-pillar coordination challenges. However, progress is limited and will require continued TAA efforts at the ANP zone level. Moreover, ANDSF commander emphasis on cross-leveling supplies, property accountability, and fuel and ammunition consumption reports is limited while corruption continues to impact readiness down to the unit level.

Although they are improving, the ANDSF continue to struggle with short-term operational planning in response to insurgent offensives and appropriate force employment. The ANDSF effectively use ASSF units – ANASOC kandaks and Ktah Khas units in particular – to increase their capability to neutralize terrorist networks and deny terrorist safe havens with limited coalition support. However, the ANDSF rely heavily on the ASSF for conventional operations where the ANA or ANP would be more appropriate. Additionally, after successful ASSF counter-attacks, poorly planned and executed ANA and ANP holding operations have resulted in the Taliban or other groups’ quick return to an area. Within the ANA, combat capabilities such as artillery and the Mobile Strike Force brigades are not sufficiently coordinated and integrated into operational planning. Moreover, Mobile Strike Force brigades are often used in defensive operations or employed in static positions, which hinders their intended use as an offensive maneuver capability. Despite enhanced accountability mechanisms and improved command and control systems, police forces across the MoI continue to be misemployed for personal security or for mission sets outside their intended scope. This detracts from ANDSF combat capability and effectiveness against the insurgency and terrorist networks.

Attrition: Persistently high attrition rates require additional resources that must be devoted to recruiting, training, and retaining personnel. Furthermore, persistently high attrition also degrades combat effectiveness...this reporting period it is 2.4 percent, an increase when compared to the previous reporting period. However, attrition has remained close to its three-year historical average of 2.2 percent. Although ANA attrition varies dramatically by the corps, overall ANA monthly attrition was just below 3 percent of the force, compared with 2.5 percent over the last reporting period and 2 percent during the same time period last year. ANP monthly attrition is 1.9 percent and has remained relatively stable over the last several years. AAF and ASSF units continue to maintain the lowest attrition rates and highest retention rates of all ANDSF pillars. The number of ANDSF personnel dropped from the rolls continues to be the single largest category of attrition, while voluntary separations account for the second largest group.

ANA soldiers and ANP police officers that are dropped from the rolls rarely return to duty. Although policies exist to prevent personnel from going absent without leave, they are often unenforced. Moreover, commanders frequently welcome personnel back without exercising any formal discipline. In an acknowledgement of these attrition challenges, on January 7, 2016, President Ghani issued a decree stating that ANDSF personnel who returned to their units in the six months after the decree would not be prosecuted for desertion or going absent without leave.

Challenges that cause ANDSF personnel to become dropped from the rolls and contribute to overall attrition include deficient and unaccountable leadership, corruption, poor equipment provision and support, and “quality of life” issues such as compensation, insufficient casualty and martyr care, absence or misunderstanding of leave policies and procedures, and inadequate living and working conditions. In addition, units in high-threat areas are often not granted leave due to operational requirements or are not managed efficiently within an operational readiness cycle, which leads to combat weariness and fatigue. Although the casualty rate is only one component that contributes to overall ANDSF attrition, many advisors report combat weariness as a major factor that leads to attrition, especially in young Afghan leaders. Coalition advisors continue to work with the ANDSF on addressing these issues by helping the Afghans improve leadership through merit-based selection and assignment of Afghan commanders, enhanced leadership development and training, and building ministerial capacity in areas such as personnel accountability and management and developing and implementing operational reporting and readiness.
cycles. In spite of these challenges, the overall size of the ANDSF has remained relatively stable, although it is several thousand personnel below the authorized 352,000 level.

**Force changes and Flexibility:** Although the ANDSF and MoD and MoI leadership recognize the force protection advantage and additional offensive combat power they gain by adjusting their force posture, ANDSF progress on checkpoint consolidation and the appropriate allocation of forces across the country is still uneven. Implementation of various force consolidation initiatives remains a challenge due to political pressure from local officials, complaints from the local population in an area, public perceptions of security, and concerns that insurgents can exploit terrain that does not have a fixed ANDSF presence. Moreover, local commanders are reticent to consolidate checkpoints because, in some instances, they provide the commanders with illicit income. Beyond the resistance from provincial governors and local powerbrokers, senior MoD and MoI leaders have been either unwilling or unable to enforce President Ghani’s continued directives to posture the force more effectively and to reduce reliance on static positions.

Broadly emplaced checkpoints spread the ANDSF too thin and create challenges for logistics, supply management, and the provision of reinforcements. Combined, these factors make fixed positions vulnerable to insurgent attacks and therefore contribute to the high ANDSF casualty rate. RS assessments have found that a high number of static checkpoints in a province directly correlates with higher ANDSF casualties in that province.

As of the beginning of the reporting period, the ANA maintained an estimated 1,100 static checkpoints or fixed positions, while the ANP pillars, not including the ABP, maintained an estimated 7,300 static checkpoints or fixed positions. A key component of Operation Shafaq is the continued reduction of these checkpoints. The goal of coalition advising in this area and Afghan government, MoD, and MoI force consolidation initiatives is not focused on a percentage reduction in the number of fixed positions, but rather on increased offensive combat power and force maneuverability. The ANA 209th Corps and 111th Capital Division remain the least reliant on static positions, while the ANA 201st and 215th Corps are the most reliant. In areas where the ANA have planned to reposition its forces, however, ANA units often are left waiting for ANP and ALP forces to provide reinforcements or take up positions holding previously-cleared areas. Additionally, irregular and contradictory reporting from the district and provincial level has also exacerbated the ANP’s struggle to reduce checkpoints.

Even as the number of checkpoints has decreased over the last year and over the reporting period, there has not been a net increase in ANDSF maneuver capability due to uneven implementation. Furthermore, ANDSF personnel who come off checkpoints are often unprepared to maintain area security because they are untrained in conducting offensive, intelligence-driven operations. The coalition is focusing TAA efforts in this area to demonstrate to the ANDSF how to develop and maintain a security strategy that does not overstretched the force. These initiatives include training the Afghans to replace fixed positions with mobile checkpoints and patrols and helping the ANA corps and ANP zones implement MoD and MoI leadership directives.

There is no valid way to put these problems in perspective, given the acute limits to unclassified reporting. The DoD report does, however, at least flag them, and raises critical questions about the value of measures of readiness that do not address actual combat performance. The SIGAR reporting is no longer allow to report the details of even generic Afghan effectiveness reports in unclassified form, and is limited to broad discussions of “essential functions,” manning levels, equipment and maintenance, and broad problems in the MoD and command levels. These do have some use, but do not measure warfighting progress and problems.

The SIGAR report also notes that:

USFOR-A assesses that the ANDSF is still developing but is a capable force….However, USFOR-A reports that U.S. advisors participating in the RS train, advise, and assist mission have little or no direct contact with ANDSF units below ANA corps and ANP zone-headquarters levels….The effort undertaken since late last year to reconstitute several battalions of the ANA 215th Corps is one exception to this.245 The advisors rely on data provided by the Afghan ministries to evaluate the operational readiness and effectiveness of the ANDSF; the consistency, comprehensiveness, and credibility of this data varies.
Like the DoD report, SIGAR lists some areas of real progress in the Afghan army, but also warns that:  

USFOR-A reports ANDSF performance in “combined arms” operations—operations that integrate multiple assets such as infantry, artillery, and air forces—is uneven. The ANDSF requires Coalition support to effectively incorporate capabilities such as artillery to alleviate the reliance on air-to-ground capabilities, to better integrate air-to-ground capabilities into combined arms operations, and to develop intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities. Within the ANA, combat capabilities such as artillery and the Mobile Strike Force Brigades are not sufficiently coordinated and integrated into operational planning. Moreover, USFOR-A reports the Mobile Strike Force Brigades are often used in defensive operations or are deployed in static positions, hindering their intended use as an offensive capability...

The RS Advise and Assist Cell-Southwest (AAC-SW) provides security-force assistance to the ANA 215th Corps responsible for only Helmand Province, as Nimroz Province was recently transferred to the ANA 207th Corps. According to the RS deputy chief of staff for communications, a significant number of the ANA leadership within the 215th Corps have been replaced—the corps commander, all the brigade commanders, and also many of the lower level commanders.

…USFOR-A reports the Afghans have made modest progress moving to an offensive-oriented strategy, but they continue to struggle with pursuing the Taliban and holding areas once cleared. Coalition advisors have advocated a more sustainable security strategy that consolidates forces where needed to provide security to key areas of the country. Additionally, according to USFOR-A, ANDSF commander emphasis on cross-leveling resources (adjusting inventories among units to avoid excess accumulations and shortages), property accountability, and consumption reports is limited, and corruption continues to impact readiness down to the unit level.

The Lead Inspector General reports only provide a brief summary of command view of effectiveness, and no assessment of overall progress or the impact of the train and assist mission.

The end result is that there is no meaningful transparency on the real world combat capabilities of the ANA, or the impact of the train and assist mission in supporting and improving these capabilities. While there are valid security reasons to limit the level of public detail, the present level official reporting fails to provide either a meaningful view of progress or any real leverage on the Afghan forces to improve their performance. It is so broad and unfocused that it not only fails to give a meaningful view of developments.

It provides only episodic and almost random pressure on the Afghan Army to make key improvements, and spends far more time on flagging the best elements of the ANA rather than showing the progress in addressing key weaknesses. Official reporting should be used as leverage, not simply as a public relations effort.

A Zero-Based Review of the Requirement Focused on Actual Warfighting Capability: Total Forces

The lack of serious assessment of the role of the police in combat, and of its interaction with local governments in providing security, is even more apparent. The Afghan National Police and Afghan Local Police are also a critical element of the Afghan forces. As has been noted earlier, the ANP has a total authorized strength of 157,000 or 45% of the total of 352,000 including the ANA and ANAF. The ANP also have lower attrition rates and made up 46% of the assigned strength in May 2016.

The Afghan Local Police should add some 30,000 more personnel more to this total – making the police 49% of the total security forces – but SIGAR reports that such data are increasingly problematic:
Afghan Local Police (ALP) members, known as “guardians,” are usually local citizens selected by village elders or local leaders to protect their communities against insurgent attack, guard facilities, and conduct local counterinsurgency missions.

As of May 2016, according to the NATO Special Operations Component Command-Afghanistan (NSOCC-A), the ALP has 29,838 guardians, 25,004 of whom are trained. Consistent with advising the Afghan security forces to the ANA corps and ANP zone or equivalent level, NSOCC-A advises the ALP at the ALP Staff Directorate level. According to Afghan reporting, 0.21% of ALP guardians were killed in action during the first five months of 2016. An additional 1.41% have been dropped from the rolls, while none were reported becoming disabled or injured. These numbers yield an aggregate attrition rate of 1.62%. The Afghan government is no longer reporting the number of ALP guardians who have renewed their contracts…NSOCC-A reports the FY 2016 cost to support the ALP at its authorized end strength of 30,000 is $117 million. The United States expects to fund approximately $112.5 million, with the Afghan government contributing the remaining $4.5 million…

In its October 2015 Quarterly Report to the United States Congress, SIGAR reported on MOI reforms enacted after the Afghan Uniform Police in 2015 assessed the ALP in 164 of the 170 districts in which they operate. This quarter NSOCC-A reported efforts continue to enroll the ALP personnel into the Afghan Human Resources Information Management System, to transition ALP salary payments to an electronic funds-transfer process, and to inventory materiel… According to NSOCC-A the FY 1395 assessment is under way, with all ALP district assessments to be completed by December 20, 2016.

A zero-based review of the requirements for a conditions-based strategy needs to focus providing the proper train and assist, and combat support, resources to the other elements of the Afghan security forces, and with the same priority as given to the Army. Far too much of the analysis and reporting on the military aspects of the war has focused on the ANA.

The police play a key paramilitary role in the war. They are often the first Afghan force to be attacked by insurgents. They often take the most casualties and they provide a critical level of support to the ANA in the field. The warfighting history of Afghanistan is as much a history of police successes and failures as of the ANA and AAF. They play a role in all three major aspects of counterinsurgency: “Win, hold, and build.”

At the same time, the functions of the police go beyond the military dimension and illustrate the fact that counterinsurgency and most forms of large-scale asymmetric/irregular warfare are exercises in civil-military operations. The police are the image of Afghan government security that most Afghans see, and their effectiveness and freedom from corruption is a critical aspect of building popular support.

The police limit insurgent ability to attack in areas the ANA lacks the strength to defend and cover. Equally important, Afghan local government cannot function or move out of District and urban facilities without them. Neither can the justice system – to the extent there are enough judges, lawyers, court, and prisons for a weak and often ineffective legal system to function. The failure of the justice system to meet Afghan popular needs on a timely and effective basis has been a critical problem in the past and one that has led Afghans to turn to the Taliban for quick justice as a way of avoiding feuds and local violence.

The SIGAR and the Lead Inspector General do not report in detail on police problems and effectiveness. The DoD semiannual report has tended to provided less and less detail on the problems in the police and the nature of the train and assist mission over time – partly because of declining access and also because foreign advisors like the Italian Carabinieri have played a major role in the train and assist mission. The June 2016 DoD report does note, however, that:

While the current focus of the ANP is to combine its capabilities with the ANA to fight the insurgency, the
long-term goal for the ANP remains the transition to a more traditional community police force. Currently, ANP forces are often on the front lines during the “hold” phase of counterinsurgency operations. However, they are not sufficiently trained or equipped for traditional counterinsurgency tactics as they have limited or no crew-served weapons, anti-armor weapons, armored vehicles, or ISR assets. The ANP is generally recognized to be several years behind the ANA in its development.

Provincial chiefs of police and other local officials often misuse ANP forces for missions outside of their intended scope. In addition, ANP forces are often influenced by local power brokers or employed as personal bodyguards. The creation of the new ANP zone structure in January 2016 is intended to address this and other command and control issues by centralizing command from the MoI to zone commanders who oversee all ANP force pillars in their region...

Similar to the ANA, attrition levels can be attributed to poor Afghan leadership and the failure of consistently granting leave to lower enlisted personnel. In addition, the ANP have sustained a disproportionately higher number of casualties than the ANA due to inadequate training and equipment, poor planning processes, and a sub-optimal force posture that leaves ANP forces 88 vulnerable at static checkpoints. This casualty rate and its proximate causes also contribute to the ANP’s 1.9 percent monthly attrition rate. Although the ANP overall does not suffer from a shortage of new recruits, more successful re-contracting rates would result in improved policing and combat effectiveness by retaining experienced personnel.

...Some zone commanders have had greater success than others at establishing positional authority over provincial chiefs of police who previously retained authority over all ANP forces in their province as well as over other security and government officials in their area of responsibility. Other issues include the mis-ranking of staff positions, which creates challenges for command authority. For instance, the ANP Zone 404 commander is a two-star general while an existing provincial chief of police in his region is a three-star general. The ANP is developing an ANP zone SOP document that will help streamline and standardize the process for establishing zone headquarters.

...Leadership across AUP units varies, but generally senior MoI and AUP leaders do not empower the lower levels to make decisions. Moreover, local AUP units and leaders are susceptible to influence by local power brokers and government officials.

...ALP personnel accountability discrepancies identified during the district assessments included ALP Guardians working under local powerbroker control and “ghost” personnel being listed on personal management and payroll documents and systems. On January 16, 2016, two full districts identified as working for local powerbrokers were disestablished, and their 1,036 tashkil positions were reallocated to other districts.

In total, over 2,000 ALP Guardians were removed to reduce local powerbroker influence during the reporting period. Separately, the district assessments revealed 2,235 “ghost” personnel that have since been removed from the AHRIMS and other paper-based systems.

ALP personnel accountability is also a critical component of ALP operational effectiveness. ALP units under powerbroker control can not only detract from security, they can also contribute directly to insecurity if they abuse their power or perpetrate human rights abuses against the local population. ALP Guardians at the checkpoints suffer from logistical issues created by the ANP provincial headquarters’ hoarding and infrequent distribution of equipment. Although logistics support to the ALP from the MoI national level logistics nodes has improved recently, the provincial headquarters frequently have challenges maintaining accountability of equipment and supplies – particularly motorcycles and pickup trucks intended for ALP units. NSOCC–A advisors are working with the ANP National Logistics Center at Wardak to ensure it is providing direct support to ALP units as required. In addition, during this reporting period the ALP support tashkil was adjusted to improve operational and logistics accountability below the ANP zone and provincial headquarters level and to improve equipment distribution.

Finally, the MoI Deputy Minister for Security and Deputy Minister for Support released a cipher directing that all ALP supplies and equipment received at MoI Regional Logistics Centers must be signed for and distributed by an ALP district chief or his or her designee.
ANCOP units have limited organic explosive ordnance disposal and counter-IED capability as well as limited ability to clear transportation routes. Given the ANCOP’s mission set to support crisis and counterterrorism events in high-threat areas, these limited capabilities are a critical area for further improvement. Moreover, ANCOP personnel devoted to these areas suffer from high attrition and a high casualty rate due to inadequate training and management.

The GCPSU struggles with integrating intelligence into operations and with sustainment support. The MoI is unable to provide adequate supplies to the GCPSU to complete routine missions. Tactical units frequently face significant sustainment challenges that disrupt operations and limit the GCPSU’s operational tempo. Moreover, the GCPSU has limited connectivity with the MoI computer network and NIMS, which limits its ability to synchronize and coordinate operations effectively. GCPSU personnel often utilize unsecure commercial phone and email systems for communication between and across operational and tactical elements.

These problems, and the fact so many surveys and press reports indicate serious problems with police effectiveness and corruption highlight the need to review the level of support that they are getting from the U.S.

**Help the Afghans to Manage the Their Security Forces**

Afghan governance tends to be most corrupt and incompetent at the top, and DoD report after DoD report has touched upon the problems in the Afghan Ministry of Defense (MOA) and Afghan Ministry of Information.

Once again, the June 2016 report reflects a mixture of problems and progress, but the key issues it finds in the Ministry of Defense include:

During this reporting period, the MoD replaced more than 40 general officers, primarily in the ANA 215th Corps in Helmand and the 205th Corps in Kandahar Province, as well as across the ministry and General Staff. These changes, combined with efforts late in 2015 to remove or reassign other ineffective or corrupt leaders, have resulted in a nearly 40 percent turnover of the entire ANA general officer corps in the last year, which has started to manifest itself in improved ministerial functions, such as better outcomes from senior leader meetings and a more proactive approach to persistent challenges. The MoD is also slowly progressing in its efforts to increase the number of civilians within its workforce.

...Despite this positive momentum and progress, a reluctance to implement technical systems and processes, reliance on informal networks or inefficient processes, and centralized decision-making continue to hinder effective MoD resource management and procurement capability. Additionally, due in large part to the National Procurement Commission’s oversight and approval function for all Afghan government contracts; MoD financial and contract execution rates are improving, although at a slower rate than expected. Coalition advisors worked closely with their MoD counterparts to ensure that the new Afghan procurement law passed on January 12, 2016, maintained high standards for accountability while also allowing for efficient procurement processes. ...there is still room for improvement on current budget execution.

As of March 2016, the MoD had identified 46 critical contracts valued at $72.5 million to transition into FY 1395 operations and maintenance contract frameworks and had already approved 295 of 320 contracts necessary to execute the FY 1395 budget. By the end of the fifth month of FY 1395 (mid-May 2016), the MoD had executed approximately 25 percent of its total FY 1395 budget of $1.3 billion, a good pace of execution early in the Afghan fiscal year. Coalition advisors continue to assist the MoD in awarding the long-delayed MoD ground fuel contract. This prolonged delay resulted in a $49 million gap in expected fuel purchases and escalates the risk to ANA and other MoD force pillar readiness.

...MoD leadership focus is inconsistent, and corruption and accountability remain challenges at lower levels of the ANA...MoD personnel and resources are sufficient to support the increased emphasis on corruption investigations and prosecutions. However, information sharing within the MoD between the GS G2 (Intelligence), GS Inspector General (IG), and GS Legal regarding major corruption allegations is still sporadic and senior leaders display limited willingness to investigate cases fully and prepare investigations...
for appropriate prosecutions. In the instances where the political will to pursue corruption exists, corruption cases involving civilian leaders and employees of the MoD must be sent to the Attorney General’s Office (AGO) for investigation and prosecution where AGO-MoD coordination is still limited. This further erodes MoD willingness to pursue corruption cases since they frequently do not see the results of their efforts. Nonetheless, there are some signs of progress as the GS IG directed a special investigation into several ANA 215th Corps corruption allegations…

… Logistics and maintenance support remains one of the biggest challenges for the MoD. Although there have been marginal improvements in sustainment capabilities, the MoD and ANA forces lack the organizational capacity and the will to govern and enforce management controls, contract oversight, and reporting. Although coalition advisors have helped the Afghans develop the processes and procedures to increase the timeliness and volume of logistical support to the ANA corps, TAA efforts at the ANA corps level have not filtered down to lower levels or been implemented fully. Moreover, organizations such as the MoD Acquisition, Technology, and Weapons Office continue to be staffed minimally despite increases to the size of the office within the tashkil.

… The MoD has struggled to build its organic maintenance capability. In many ANA corps, maintenance personnel and technical specialists are not serving in their slotted positions because commanders use them for other personnel needs such as infantry. This lowers equipment readiness rates since mechanics are not receiving the proper training and experience to improve their maintenance capabilities. Overall the ANA is approximately 600 personnel below the approximately 3,500 mechanics required to maintain its fleet of more than 51,000 vehicles. The National Maintenance Strategy contracts -- 48 of which will help address long-term ANA maintenance deficiencies -- are expected to be awarded in April 2017. In the interim, the current “bridge” contract is providing training for ANA mechanics, supply specialists, and maintenance supervisors at each ANA CSB to help improve organic maintenance capability.

… At the operational level, the MoD, in concert with coalition advisory efforts, identified several priority issues including the improvement of force allocation and consolidation to generate more combat power in support of a more offensive strategy. For example, EF 6 advisors supported MoD efforts to synchronize operations between the ANA 205th and ANA 215th Corps as part of the southern component of the spring and summer campaign plan. Due to a lack of specificity in the Afghan national-level operational planning documents for Operation Shafaq, TAAC-S provided significant assistance to the ANA 205th Corps for mission analysis, planning, and producing orders to subordinate units.

Key issues for the Ministry of Interior included:

The MoI lagged behind the MoD in its transition from the FY 1394 to the FY 1395 budget, but it made strong progress during the second half of the reporting period. Heading into FY 1395 the MoI had more than 30 major contracts that were at risk of lapsing. During this reporting period, coalition advisors assisted MoI procurement and contracting officials identify the most critical contracts and supported MoI and Afghan government procurement processes to award them.

Similar to efforts with the MoD, CSTC-A has helped the MoI simplify its contracting process, transitioning 318 separate contracts into 10 larger framework contracts that allow for sub-contracts in each province for specific items such as food and fuel.

The MoI’s budget planning capability remains limited. The MoI submitted its DPPP for FY 1395 in February 2016 – nearly three months late – and required continued assistance at all levels to generate the ANP contracting requirements that drive the procurement planning process. As a result of these delays, CSTC-A assessed nearly $1 million in penalties to reinforce financial management responsibility as part of the FY 1395 commitment letters. This four month delay will also adversely affect and delay FY 1395 budget execution.

The Kabul City Police in particular continue to struggle with internal controls and accountability of resources, fuel supply, delivery, and the consumption processes for police departments. In addition, vendor companies often delay the delivery of fuel in the hopes that daily changes in the oil prices will result in a higher profit. Because of their limited procurement and resource management capability, Kabul-based
police departments frequently meet their fuel needs from non-traditional sources that contribute to the risk of corruption in the procurement process.

… Despite limited capacity to combat corruption and report, investigate, and act upon allegations of GVHR, the MoI has taken positive steps to improve transparency, ministerial oversight, rule of law, and to reduce corruption by implementing various structural reforms and by terminating or suspending several key officials. During this reporting period, the MoI created a number of steering committees and associated programs, such as the Transparency and Accountability in Law Enforcement (TALE) committee, and developed a Counter and Anti-Corruption Plan, to better coordinate its efforts internally. Furthermore, the MoI removed the head of the Special Intelligence Unit within the Counter Narcotics Police of Afghanistan (CNPA) and terminated more than 100 officials within the Central Prisons Directorate for incompetence and corruption, illustrating its commitment to reform in this area. Finally, after a corruption scandal, in February 2016 MoI leadership removed the commanding general of the Major Crimes Task Force (MCTF) and transferred the entire organization to the AACP, which is better suited for the MCTF’s criminal investigation and counter-corruption mission.

…The decentralized nature of the MoI contributes to the higher propensity for corruption as compared to the MoD. Several divisions within the MoI will initiate corruption investigations but their work is not well coordinated or synchronized.

… The current disconnected and manual payroll and personnel management systems make it impractical for the MoI to account for and manage its personnel in a timely and accurate fashion.

… As of May 7, 2016, an estimated 7,000 ANP personnel remained untrained. These untrained ANP include primarily new recruits and officers who had previously been serving in roles without sufficient basic training.

… Currently, less than 15 percent of the MoI’s over 47,000 vehicle fleet is composed of tactical vehicles including protected mobility vehicles.

… Overall deficiencies in the MoI planning process reflect the challenges associated with the decentralized nature of the MoI and its various force pillars, the limited ability of ANP staff at the operational and tactical level to implement strategic guidance, and competing priorities and external influencers at the lower levels. Institutional and structural changes within the MoI have helped to improve its strategic level planning capability, but this capability requires further development. At the operational level, the ANP continues to struggle. Although ANP leaders have begun working more closely with their ANA counterparts on deliberate, planned operations, ANP operational planners are often less involved in planning for larger counter-offensive operations and crisis situations. Nevertheless, the MoI has displayed progress in some areas during this reporting period including the timely initiation of an MoI-wide policy review, the establishment of Deputy Minister-level strategic board meetings, and the approval of several strategic planning documents.

… Improvements in the MoI operational planning capability have lagged behind the recent gains in strategic planning. Mid-level and lower-level ANP commanders are not proficient at translating ministerial-level guidance.

… One cause of the MoI’s infrequent use of intelligence to drive operations is its limited use of ISR assets and intelligence enabling systems. The MoI has few tashkil slots for ISR equipment and enabling systems and therefore must rely on ANA intelligence collection assets and information sharing across ANP pillars to increase its use of intelligence. For instance, the MoI has attempted to use intelligence collected by ANA-managed Aerostat balloons. However, ANA corps are reluctant to share information. Intelligence sharing is occurring through the OCC-P/Rs and the Nasrat, but not directly between ANA and ANP units.

It should be stressed that many of these problems are typical of such Ministries in the developing world and that both Ministries are making some progress in most areas. As is discussed later, however, Afghanistan is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, and Afghanistan needs both outside help and pressure to make its MOD and MOI more effective. There also seems to be need to go beyond measures of effectiveness like the ability of each Ministry to spend its budget
and evaluate how well these budgets are structured, how well the money is actually managed, and how much is lost due to waste, fraud, and abuse.

**Mission Two: Stay in Combat and Call It Counterterrorism, but Size the Effort to the Need**

Train and assist is only part of the U.S. effort. There is an equal need for a zero-based net assessment of the size and nature of the U.S. combat and combat support forces that Afghanistan will need. The June 2016 DoD report called this combat “counterterrorism”—just as the President did—and described the mission as follows:

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.

The U.S. counterterrorism mission complements the TAA mission to build the capacity of the ANDSF. 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 nor the president’s July 6th statement said anything about the scale of direct U.S. combat and combat support. They failed to do so even though they were issued at a time when Afghan forces were under heavy and constant pressure, are taking critical casualties, and are suffering from a serious attrition problems 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…”\textsuperscript{45} Similarly, press reports increasingly report U.S. air action, and include statements like, “the senior generals led the fighting, pushing their ground troops and calling in strikes by Afghan and American aircraft to fend off Taliban advances…”\textsuperscript{46}

The President’s July 7\textsuperscript{th} statement also dodged around the fact that counterterrorism actually 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. A rose by any other name may be a rose, but combat by any other name is not a rose.

**The Need for Limited Amounts of Ground Power**

There is a tremendous difference between putting a few, carefully selected, small elements of U.S. ground forces in place to support Afghan forces when they are under extreme pressure, and deploying large-scale combat units. Setting absolutes like no “combat boots on the ground” does not serve U.S. and allied interests, and risks losing winning wars that could be won at relatively minimal cost.

The U.S. has already acted on the need for such U.S. combat elements in Iraq and Syria, and possibly with limited Special Forces elements in Yemen. Secretary Carter also stated more openly on July 12, 2016 that:\textsuperscript{47}

> We have our counter-terrorism forces, which are here focused on our counterterrorism mission against the nine terrorist groups that are in the area. Those number roughly 2,150. We have our troops doing advising, so they number around 3,000. And then we have our troops that enable both of the other missions, they enable both advising and counterterrorism. And they number about 3,300.

The U.S. needs to seriously consider whether limited increases could make a major difference in stiffening Afghan forces and helping them in emergencies, and allowing “train and assist” forces to perform combat missions. It also needs a zero-based review of possible limited deployments of attack helicopters like the AH-64, and fire support systems like the M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) the Marines now use to support Iraqi government and Kurdish forces in fighting ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

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

Adding more combat Airpower, however, may be the most important change the U.S. could make in providing limited additional combat forces. Airpower has already proven to be 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 has been slow to update the data on U.S. air operations in Afghanistan, which still lagged back to end of July 2016 in September 2016. These end-July data are shown in Figure 4, and show 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 3,209 from January 1 to July 31, 2016. 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 322 from January 1 to May 31, 2016.

It is important to note that the sortie rate in some other aspects of U.S. airpower dropped less—perhaps because they did 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 12,145 from January 1 to July 31, 2016.

At the same time, Air cargo, airdrops, and tanker sorties were cut much more sharply. This reflected the end of the needs to conduct major airlifts of U.S. military personnel from mid-2014 onwards, similar cuts in airlift, a halt to air drops of supplies after 2014, and the end of almost all U.S. casualty airlifts and evacuations.

Although some media reports indicate there has already been an increase in the U.S. use of airpower, it is unclear that such an increase took place by mid-2016. The U.S. commander in Afghanistan, General Nicolson, stated in a press conference on July 28, 2016 that:

...since January, we've conducted about 470 airstrikes, just to give you a rollup. Of counter-terrorist strikes -- specific counter-terrorist strikes, about 180. Under the new authorities, which are called strategic effects, which have been in effect since early June, about 40 airstrikes, plus or minus. So again, the use of authority -- you know, the designation of an area as being under the authorities does not necessarily mean we immediately follow with an airstrike. But I think that'll give you a sense of the numbers.

Moreover, the previous 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 was all very well for the DoD July 2016 report to state that:

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 still far too low to meet the need, and the AAF is still being expanded too quickly and under considerable pressure. The June 2016 DoD report describes both slow deliveries and series readiness problems.

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. 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.

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.

SIGAR presented a somewhat more critical view of the AAF in its July 30, 2016 report. 55

The AAF’s current inventory of aircraft, as of June 6, 2016, includes:

- 3 Mi-35 helicopters
- 47 Mi-17 helicopters
- 15 MD-530 helicopters
- 24 C-208 airplanes
- 4 C-130 airplanes
- 8 A-29 airplanes

This quarter, USFOR-A reported 10 Mi-17s, 2 MD-530s, and 1 C-130 were currently unusable for combat operations. In addition, four of the eight A-29s are operational with the remaining four expected to clear
all pre-operating testing in June…The newest addition to the AAF, the A-29 Super Tucanos, have proven to be valuable assets on a strategic and tactical level. Four pilots reached combat-mission-ready status on April 1; two of them completed the AAF’s first A-29 combat mission on April 14. By May 24, the AAF had undertaken 18 A-29 missions…Over the next two years, the AAF will receive 12 more A-29s DOD has procured once their pilots complete their training at Moody Air Force Base, and 12 MD-530s still on the assembly line…Not yet reflected in the AAF inventory are 10 of the 12 MD-530 Cayuse Warrior helicopters, five were delivered on June 17, 2016, and five more on July 17. These helicopters have the capability to fire rockets or .50-caliber machine guns. Another two helicopters are scheduled to arrive by the end of summer…

The Wall Street Journal reported on the urgency to replace the aging Mi-17s and Mi-35s that are reaching the end of their service life. According to that news report, over 16,000 Mi-17 missions were flown in 2015, a significant increase over the 4,500 in 2014, and the continuous demand is placing pressure on the existing AAF fleet. The Wall Street Journal also reported that U.S. commanders in Afghanistan are waiting for DOD to respond to recommendations they have provided. In vetting comments, DOD questioned the accuracy of that news report…

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 fully away from the present 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 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. Once again, this is a key rationale for a zero-based net assessment of the war, and of options for giving Afghanistan a clear chance of success.
Matching Military Support to U.S. Financial Aid and the Performance of the Afghan MoD and MoI

The final element of such an effort is a zero-based examination of military aid levels. This examination should have two parts: The first is to ensure the levels of aid are adequate and take into account the need to adjust them to supply the actual pace of combat, losses of equipment, and the need for new equipment and facilities. The second is to make the flow of U.S. aid conditional on reasonable levels of Afghan efficiency and honesty in using the money.

Providing Adequate Levels of Aid

The United States has publicly 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 equally clear, however, that Afghanistan cannot survive without the proper levels of U.S. aid, and fixing their level regardless of need and conditions in the field makes as little sense as imposing arbitrary deadlines on U.S. withdrawals.

The history of U.S. aid spending has been erratic, with major swings in spending from year-to-year in given aid, program, and project categories – graphed by major aid category in the Quarterly Reports of SIGAR. Spending has never been tied to credible measures of effectiveness, and the lags between the drafting of budget requests and actual funding in the field
have led to substantial disconnects between policy goals at one time and actual levels of effort at another.

The overall funding levels through 2016 are shown in Figure 5, and the July 30, 2016 Quarterly report by SIGAR summarizes the past levels of aid to Afghan security forces as follows:58

As of June 30, 2016, the U.S. Congress had appropriated more than $68.4 billion to support the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF). This accounts for 60% of all U.S. reconstruction funding for Afghanistan since fiscal year (FY) 2002. In 2005, Congress established the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF) to build, equip, train, and sustain the ANDSF, which comprises all security forces under the Ministry of Defense (MOD) and the Ministry of Interior (MOI). Additionally, the ASFF is used to support the Afghan Local Police (ALP), which is under the MOI, although the ALP is not considered part of the ANDSF. Most U.S.-provided funds were channeled through the ASFF and obligated by either the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) or the Defense Security Cooperation Agency. Of the $63.9 billion appropriated for the ASFF, $60.1 billion had been obligated and $58.3 billion disbursed.

There are no public indications that there are serious plans for future security aid spending that are tied to estimates of Afghan need. The out-year budget estimates for all U.S. wartime expenditures or Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) are little more than “place holders,” except for the coming fiscal year, and are not tied to a clear estimate of Afghan security spending based on domestic budget revenues or aid from other states. As is the case with every aspect of U.S. security aid, everywhere in the world, there are no meaningful unclassified estimates of how the money is spent, or of corruption and waste, and there are no clear measures of effectiveness.

The July report by DoD does, however, provide some additional data on the budget request for the coming Fiscal Year:59

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.

DoD executes the other $1.887 billion of the FY 2016 ASFF 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 DoD report also notes that:60
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.

A zero-based review of the U.S. effort in Afghanistan will also need to carefully examine both actual Afghan security needs and the kind of contingency financing that may be required. It needs to examine the costs of a war the U.S. now plans to support beyond 2020, and ensure that enough aid is available to supplement Afghan spending of domestic revenues to cover attrition, combat losses, and modernization.

This may or may not require more spending than is currently contemplated in the near term, but it seems clear that the risk of almost an indefinite period of conflict and aid spending is much higher if the United States does not provide the right combination of aid, “conditions-based” troop levels, the right kind of forward deployed enablers and advisors, and the necessary amount of airpower.

**Making the Flow of U.S. Security Aid Conditional on Reasonable Levels of Afghan Efficiency and Honesty in Using the Money**

The U.S. also, however, needs to do more than simply provide more aid, more train and assist support and more combat support. As the following section on the civil side of the war shows, the U.S. also needs to impose “conditionality” to push the Afghan government into real reform of both its military and civil effort.

This does not mean imposing U.S. approaches to planning, programming, and budgeting on the Afghan MoD and MoI where there is no urgent need for change and reform. It does not mean demanding a total end to corruption and waste, or trying to prosecute key Afghan officials regardless of the political impact.

The United States and other outside powers also need to recognize that progress takes time, this will be a substantially longer version of any already long war, and that they can only exercise leverage over a government that they properly support and that survives. This need for care and
patience is not a casual issue in dealing with an Afghan government that is so politically divided, weak, and corrupt.

Nevertheless, the need for successful outside pressure on the Afghan government to reform its present security efforts is as great in many ways as the need for more outside help in defeating the Taliban.

The U.S. and other outside allies should demand that the Afghan MoD and MoI provide a reasonable degree of public accountability and transparency. They should insist that the U.S. and other aid donors can see convincing audits of how the money is spent, and that MoD and MoI contracts and spending have reasonable levels of integrity. It also means having the train and assist mission help develop a family of basic measures of effectiveness that tie spending to performance in broad categories like military pay to major contracts, but focus on linking spending to producing combat effectiveness as measured by actual performance in battle and by improved security efforts.

They should demand that Afghanistan to improve its anti-corruption efforts in the MoD and MoI, although should not focus on forms of leverage that challenge Afghanistan’s real nature as government by power broker and faction, and that so easily bog down in legal delays and/or politically-driven show trials and witch hunts. They should focus on controlling the flow of money, delaying it or reallocating it to bypass waste and corruption, and quietly demand personnel changes when those responsible do not respond.

The U.S. and its allies should also do this in ways that accept the risk of open confrontation when there is no other choice, and make it publically clear to the Afghan people and media that the U.S. security aid effort is conditional on Afghan performance. The U.S. in particular needs to make it clear that there is no such thing as an open-ended commitment to a marginal security partnership. Once again, an Afghan government victory in Afghanistan is desirable, but it is not a vital U.S. national interest. The U.S. should make it clear that the U.S. is prepared to leave if the Afghan government does not perform. It should leave no doubt that “conditionality” is a two-way street.
Cordesman: Strategy in Afghanistan

Total Funding

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<th>CUMULATIVE AMOUNTS APPROPRIATED, OBLIGATED, AND DISBURSED FY 2002–2016 ($ BILLIONS)</th>
<th>Appropriated</th>
<th>Obligated</th>
<th>Disbursed</th>
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<td>4.32</td>
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**Total Major Funds** $96.70 $88.31 $83.00 $9.25

**Other Reconstruction Funds** $7.54

**Operations & Oversight** $10.68

**Total** $114.93

Massive Swings in Funding the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund: the Main Category of Security Aid

IV. The Enemy is Only One of Three Threats: The Host Country and the U.S. Itself are Major Threats As Well

As part of this process, U.S. needs to take fully account of a critical lesson in counterinsurgency warfare and many large-scale asymmetric/irregular conflicts, and that applies to many other forms of strategic partnership. The U.S. not only needs a strategy that is conditional both in terms of its level of effort and host country performance, it needs to focus on the fact that serious insurgencies generally occur in what are, or are close to, “failed states.” They almost always arise in states whose political, ideological, economic, and demographic structures pose as much of a threat to the government and counterinsurgency effort as does the enemy.

*Three Critical Threats for the Price of One*

The previous military analysis, and the civil analysis to come, shows that Afghanistan—like Iraq and Syria—is a classic example of the fact that any U.S. effort to intervene in such conflicts faces at least 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 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.

These are all reasons why U.S. strategy, U.S. plans, and U.S. efforts must be based on net assessment and not simply on the enemy threat. They are also clear reasons why doctrine, field manuals, and efforts to generalize on the basis of past wars can fail. The U.S. does need to do a much better job of learning the lessons from past wars, but this will never be enough to substitute for the need to learn from the war that is actually being fought.

It will never be a substitute for fully address the limitations in a given host country and security partner, or adapting the U.S. approach to a given ally and war. This is particularly true in a world where non-state actors have come to play a steadily growing role and where the globalization of threats and ideology is as real as the globalization of the world’s economy.
The Fourth “Threat”: Allies, Coalitions, International Organizations, and Major NGOs

In some cases, there will also be a fourth and a fifth set of threats. The fourth such “threat” is the fact allies, coalitions, international organizations, and major NGOs can each create serious challenges through a lack of coordination, by imposing different standards and goals as well as national or organization limits and caveats to their military and civil role. National caveats have been a serious warfighting problem in Afghanistan in the past, but the failure of UNAMA to ever develop an effective and coordinated aid plan and management system has arguably been far more serious.

This does not mean that allies cannot still play a critical role, or bring capabilities to such wars that the U.S. lacks. Italy and France, for example, have far more experience in creating paramilitary forces than the U.S. Canadian and British Special Forces have played an important role in Iraq and Syria when U.S. political and “national caveats” limited U.S. ability to deploy its own forces to key roles.

It does mean that allies and partnerships can complicate plans and operations, that their needs and limits must be taken into full consideration, and the U.S. must compromise in some cases and accept important limits and costs in others. This is true in both in military and civil terms.

In the military case, an ally may not be able to engage in needed combat or high-risk roles, or may bring different rules of engagement, legal, tactical and strategic priorities to the war. It is also ironic that the more important an ally is, the more important even limited differences can be. Britain and the United States found this out in working to together in Afghanistan between 2002 and 2013, and in Iraq after 2003.

The faults also scarcely lie solely in U.S. allies. The U.S. has made such problems things worse in some cases by assuming it can task its allies without fully consulting them, that it is in the right without really listening to its allies and partners, and that “partnership” can be treated as a noun rather than as an active verb.

In the civil case, the overall lack of coordination between 2002 and 2014 was a constant problem. Every country that provided aid in the field in Afghanistan brought a different approach to planning and executing civil aid, to the way it ran or participated in Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), to the way it coordinated with its own and foreign militaries, and to the way it dealt with the various elements of the Afghan government.

The same was generally true of key international institutions, which should have played a vital civil role in “transition” long before most combat forces withdrew at the end of 2014. The UN failed totally to carry out UNAMA’s assign mission of coordinating aid plans and programs. Other key international institutions like the IMF and World Bank were not given the proper role and attention in developing and executing economic reforms while major international conferences threw aid money at civil problems in return for Afghan pledges of reform that were never really executed. Many NGOs improvise their “own approach and efforts without coordinating with other efforts, and without fully considering Afghan needs, implementation problems, and the realities imposed by war.

The U.S. compounded these problems by seeking the largest possible coalitions, seeking token allied deployments and aid efforts that had to be supported and protected but had little more than political value at best, and not taking the political and resources constrains its allies and don or faced fully into account. It is fine to have large “coalitions of the willing,” but the only military and aid efforts that should actually be deployed belong to the far more limited range of nations, international organizations, and NGOs that makeup “coalitions of the useful and the capable.”
In the real world, it makes no sense to seek impossible levels of allied unity and coordination, or to assume that the U.S. is always right, and should always take the lead. Success means honestly recognizing the limits of alliance, the need allied states have for national caveats and to take different approaches, and be realistic in achieving what can actually be done rather than trying to impose mission impossible.

The Fifth Threat: Other Neutral or Hostile Outside Powers

The Fifth threat is the “threat” posed by other outside powers – whether neighbors or nations coming from outside the region. It is no secret to anyone who has deal with the Afghan war that Pakistan’s covert ties to the Taliban and Al Qaida have often made it as much of a threat as any ally. At best, Pakistan has been a “frenemy” giving priority to its own interests and supporting and hosting key elements of the threat like Al Qaida central, the Taliban, and Haqqani Network.

In practice, the Pakistani military has often it has been more of a threat than an ally. It has sought to extort every advantage it can in terms of aid, only attacked extremist forces that threatened it or the government’s control of Pakistan, and effective traded transit and overflight rights for as much as it can possibly get. As noted earlier, these are issues the U.S. has never really come to grips to with, and Pakistan remains an enemy sanctuary and covert player in Afghan politics.

The U.S. still prefers the rhetoric of alliance in spite of Pakistani behavior and a seemingly endless series of complaints. The U.S. has never been willing to use the level of pressure needed to change Pakistani behavior, and treat Pakistan for what it really is.

As for other examples, Russia tolerated U.S. action when it was in Russia’s interest. Central Asian states sold transit and staging rights. Iran initially cooperated until the U.S. carelessly invented an “axis of evil,” and then largely stood aside. In the case of the Syria-Iraq War, however, Russia’s sudden intervention in Syria in 2015 became a threat that gave new life to the Assad regime, and Iran’s role in Syria and Iraq has been a major source of regional instability. Whatever the U.S. role in counterinsurgency may or may not be, it virtually never can be a three person, zero-sum game.
V. The Other Half of Strategy and Victory: Addressing the Civil Side of the War

It is the civil side of “host country threat,” in Afghanistan, however, that is most likely to dominate plans, operations, and effort to reach a favorable outcome. It is also the area where the “U.S. threat to the U.S.” has been most serious in failing to address a key aspect of counterinsurgency operations.

Dealing with the civil side of Afghanistan’s problems cannot wait for military victory. As has been discussed in previous analysis of U.S. military efforts, 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.

A corrupt and divisive election have left its government deeply divided under a National Unity Government lead by the two main rival candidates in a failed election – with Ashraf Ghani as President, Dr. Abdullah Abdullah as Chief Executive Officer, and Abdul Rashid Dostam – a major warlord as First Vice President. Its cabinet is equally divided, and key posts like the Minister of Defense and Minister of Interior face serious problems in leadership and political support. Its political stability is further undermined by the actions of its former President, Hamid Karzai who served as President for almost ten years, from 7 December 2004 to 29 September 2014.

The National Assembly is divided into two chambers: a directly elected Wolesi Jirga or "House of the People" and an indirectly elected Meshrano Jirga or "House of Elders." The Afghan parliament often does little more than collect its salary, and has little authority over government spending – almost all of which is formally under the control of a Presidency that cannot act decisively because of its divided leadership. Its term expired in June, and new elections are supposed to be held on October 15, 2016 – in a political climate when key figures have split away from Ghani and formed new parties.

Its National Unity Government has also now ended its formal two-year period of life. It was supposed to have reformed its electoral bodies and laws, issued new electronic national IDs to prevent electoral fraud, held parliamentary and district council elections, and convened a constitutional assembly to amend the constitution to create a Prime Minister position to be held by current Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah by September 2016, but has failed to do so, and the tension between the Ghani, Abdullah, and other factions has grown.

Corruption is endemic. While a new and hopefully more honest Attorney General -- Mohammad Farid Hamidi -- was appointed in August 2016, the rule of law has not yet limited the real world ability of key power brokers to both dominate the process of governance on a national and regional basis and make use of substantial amounts of the nation’s revenues and aid money.

An article in the New York Times in early September 2016, that was based in part on an interview withd, notes that,61

…he says he has inherited an institution that he feels is in the same shape it was the morning after the Taliban government was overrun in 2001. Despite millions of dollars spent, there has been no attention to
its most basic infrastructure, or to building the capacity of the staff; only one-third of its members have higher education.

Mr. Hamidi said the attorney general’s office had been a “systematic” clearing house for graft by the elite, putting the stamp of legality on shady deals and corrupt syndicates while it pressed politically favorable prosecutions. “It was extremely political — it was a political tool at the hands of those who wanted to hit their rivals, to dishonor them,” he said. “It was a place for character assassination.”

A similar article in the Washington Post quoted him as saying, “‘The future of Afghanistan is at stake because of corruption. If we don’t act against it, we won’t be able to bring peace, stability, security or rule of law…”

These are all key reasons why the U.S. must apply conditionality to the civil side of Afghan government activity. The military side of U.S. strategy and actions in Afghanistan is only half the story in determining the changes necessary for the Afghan government to win, and the Afghan military are now the stronger half of the Afghan effort. Far too much of the civil side of Afghan governance is an ineffective, corrupt, dysfunctional mess.

The real world economics of Afghanistan present equal reasons for such conditionality. The moment the civil side of Afghan needs is addressed in any analytic detail, it becomes clear that the present U.S. strategy in Afghanistan is even weaker and more poorly defined than the military dimension would indicate. This also has occurred in spite of major past spending. 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, $9.98 billion for civilian operations, plus $4.31 billion for counternarcotics initiatives. This cost a total of $49.04 out of $113.17 billion for relief and reconstruction in Afghanistan since fiscal year (FY) 2002, or 43%.

The Afghans got far too little out of this effort, and much of the U.S. spending did little more than distort given part of the Afghan economy in ways that would not be sustainable when the flood or aid ended or were so badly managed and lacking in control of contracts and spending, that they helped turn the normal rate of Afghan corruption into a functional nightmare.

**The Host Country “Threat” is Critical in Afghanistan: An Ineffective, Corrupt, Dysfunctional Mess**

The civil side of Afghan needs is also another key area where most U.S. official reporting on the war has focused on spin and self-invented success stories, and failed to come to grips with the true nature of the war. None of reporting by the U.S. and NATO commands, or the three U.S. government reports on the Afghan war – the DoD, SIGAR, or Lead Inspector General reports – properly addresses the civil side of the insurgency, the impact of Afghan government civil failures on the course of the fighting, the success or failure of U.S. civil aid in affecting the war and meeting broader Afghan civil needs. Nor does it address any other broader aspect of the critical civil dimension or a war that is fought as much on a political, ideological, and economic level as a tactical one.

Aside from the limited and uncertain data on insurgent control and influence over districts, no aspect of the official threat assessment – or the assessment of the effectiveness of counterinsurgency effort – make more than the most token effort address the political, ideological, and economic aspects of the war for the threat, much less in net assessment terms. It
ignores the efforts to do so in past reports – evidently because the trends have been negative – and the “hearts and minds” lessons of every similar conflict since Viet Nam.

SIGAR and the Lead Inspector General have reported on individual areas of waste and failed planning on the civil side, and as well as on how Afghan public opinion reflects the government’s failings. **Figure Six** provides an example of such public opinion data and serves as a warning about public disaffection even in areas largely outside the focus on insurgent operations. It found that 52% of Afghans would leave their country if they had opportunity and resources, and that 19% had money extorted at a security checkpoint in the last 3 months.

At the same time, the poll did find windows of opportunity if the civil side improved. A total of 46% said the Afghan National Police had improved in their area in the last 6 months, and 88% of those surveyed said it would be bad for the people if the Taliban returned to power, up from 85% a year ago. Only 3 percent supported arrival of ISIL-K, compared to 7% a year ago. 64

The State and USAID portions of the text that were included in earlier versions of the DoD report, however, have largely vanished since 2014. Only token mention is now made of the need for civil reform at the very end of the July 30, 2016 DoD report, and there is no serious discussion of the political crisis in Afghanistan and the potential crisis that could occur between Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah after September 2016 – when the compromise that now allows them to share power arguably expires. 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.

Further, the DoD reports have steadily abandoned an effort to describe future trends in both the military and civil areas, 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.

In fairness, this lack of objective reporting in depth reflects a much broader and fundamental longer-term failure to integrate the civil-military effort throughout the history of the war. Much of the official U.S. Executive Branch reporting on the war has ignored or understated warnings from a long series of Afghan public opinion polls – as well as UN, IMF, World Bank, NGO, and media reporting – that warned that the Afghan political structure was fractured and dysfunctional, that Afghan governance was some of the most corrupt and incompetent in the world.
Figure 7: Declining Afghan Support for Government; Rising Opposition to Extremism

Failing the Civil Challenge

These are realities that U.S. must address if it is to shift to a conditions-based strategy. One of the tragedies of the Afghan conflict, as well as the U.S. role in the Iraq and Syria conflicts, is that far too many 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 – tried to transform Afghanistan rather than help it. They set impossible goals that did not suit Afghan politics and culture, failed to deal with Afghanistan’s critical civil governance and rule of law problems, and set improbably ambitious goals for economic development in the middle of a war.

Moreover, several key efforts did more harm than good. These included the drafting of an Afghan constitution that gave the President far too much financial authority, and the National Assembly far too little ability to actually represent key blocs of voters. They included efforts to transform Afghan governance rather than make existing system work, and to halt corruption by legal action from the top down rather than limit it through effective financial controls and keep corruption to moderate levels.

They set goals based on short-term hopes rather than credible prospects for long-term progress. They included focusing on the “ring road,” and impractical goals like the “New Silk Road,” rather than Afghan internal needs for new roads and economic distribution systems. Above all, they included the lack of any coherent approach to development aid and actually implementing key reforms—actions that wasted resources, actually encourage corruption, and did more harm than good.

The coordination of aid was turned over to a UN agency called the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). UNAMA never produced a meaningful plan or even meaningful reports on the overall nature and impact of the aid effort, and had no control even over other UN activity like the UNDP, the World Food Program and work of the specialized agencies.

U.S. efforts to create effective integrated U.S. civil-military aid 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. What should have been a slow and achievable effort tied to long term plans and commitments that reflect the fact Afghanistan could only make slow progress in war time tried to do far too much too soon, failed to take account of real world security problems, was driven by an erratic U.S. short term appropriations process, and involved inflated metrics of success rather than real measures of success.

The road was always paved with good intentions, but never really led in the right direction. USAID and other national efforts, along with the Provincial Reconstruction Team Effort and CERP had many real successes, but they were largely local, often short-lived, and accompanied by other efforts that focused on uncoordinated and ill-planned direct efforts that often were decoupled from the war and broader national needs. Aid money was 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 Bush and Obama Administrations steadily claimed levels of success in the civil side of the war that they had not achieved. They tolerated a series of Afghan promises of reform that
did not take place or were too limited and symbolic to have a major effect. The reported levels of progress often could not be supported by valid analysis, and the U.S. consistently 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. “Nation building” became confused with major aid spending and effort to transform a country rather than persuade and push the government implement reforms many national expert and leaders saw as necessary and that often had little or no cost. “Reform” became a form of rhetoric for conferences and public relations exercises, and the goal became increasing and sustaining the flow of aid money.

**Failed Governance and Corruption**

One of the key failures lay in ignoring just how bad Afghan governance really was, and how little improvement took place over time. Figure 8 shows that the World Bank estimates that Afghanistan still has one of the worst governments in the world, and this assessment is based on the basic functions of actual governance – not abstract goals like the degree of democracy or compliance with the finer details of human rights.

The World Bank also estimates that failed governance is the most serious of the three main constraints it finds to progress in Afghanistan,65

*The first and most important constraint is fragility and conflict.* Afghanistan’s fragility, defined both in terms of weak state institutions and dysfunctional societal relations leading at one extreme to violent conflict between groups, is all-pervasive and affects almost every aspect of development.

First, the government is in violent conflict with a determined and well-resourced insurgency that increasingly threatens the foundations of the state. Levels of violence are high and there are growing numbers of civilian casualties. The insurgency is bolstered both by external forces as well as internally by poor governance and lack of an inclusive political settlement.

Second, government capacity is weak, with pervasive corruption and considerable influence of historically entrenched groups. The weak state and political institutions have been a breeding ground for elite capture and corruption that in turn undermines state legitimacy.

Third, social and ethnic divisions have been exacerbated by conflict and weak institutions. These aspects of fragility and conflict undermine investor confidence, restrict the range of sectors that can feasibly drive jobs and growth, impede efforts to bolster service delivery, and undermine revenue mobilization. Furthermore, corruption and weak governance undermine all aspects of reform progress in Afghanistan, which amounts to a mutually reinforcing cycle of fragility and underdevelopment.

These failures help explain why the flood of uncontrolled outside aid funds and military spending between 2002 and 2014 became a major force that helped give Afghanistan the ranking of one of the most corrupt nations in the world. The World Bank makes this all too clear in the governance rankings shown in Figure 8. Transparency International has consistently ranked Afghanistan one of the most corrupt governments in the world, and ranked it as the 166th most corrupt country out of 168 in 2015.66 A wide range of official reports and public opinion polls also confirm this assessment, and note that it applies to what passes for Afghan elections and democracy.

The CIA World Factbook notes that,67

The 2014 presidential election was the country’s first to include a runoff, which featured the top two vote-getters from the first round, Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. Throughout the summer of 2014, their campaigns disputed the results and traded accusations of fraud, leading to a US-led diplomatic intervention that included a full vote audit as well as political negotiations between the two camps. In September 2014,
Ghani and Abdullah agreed to form the Government of National Unity, with GHANI inaugurated as President and Abdullah elevated to the newly-created position of chief executive officer. The day after the inauguration, the Ghani administration signed the US-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement and NATO Status of Forces Agreement, which provide the legal basis for the post-2014 international military presence in Afghanistan.

Despite gains toward building a stable central government, the Taliban remains a serious challenge for the Afghan Government in almost every province. The Taliban still considers itself the rightful government of Afghanistan, and it remains a capable and confident insurgent force despite its last two spiritual leaders being killed; it continues to declare that it will pursue a peace deal with Kabul only after foreign military forces depart.

These problems at the top of the government in “Kabulstan” are compounded by deep sectarian and ethnic divisions, by a constitution that does not create a valid basis for a truly representative legislature and gives the President almost total control over central government funds, and by the fact that the shell of democratic government in Kabul is offset by the reality of government run by powerbrokers throughout much of the country.

Afghan politics were at first defined by a Karzai government that put juggling power brokers and key political and security factions before effective governance and reform. When term limits finally forced 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 compromise that created a government divided between Ashraf Ghani as President and Abdullah Abdullah as CEO and seemed to call for new elections in September 2016.

The end result has been a government that is often paralyzed by factional differences, that cannot even manage its key security ministries effectively, that again talks about economic reform it largely fails to implement, that cannot control corruption, and cannot properly formulate and execute a budget – much less police its expenditures to make sure they are made honestly and are linked to credible measures of effectiveness.

As has been noted at the start of this Chapter it is also a government that was supposed to find some new political solution and leadership in the fall of 2016—either by a new election or some broad popular assembly. In practice, however, it has increasingly fragmented during 2015 and 2016, with very public increases in the tension between Ghani and Abdullah, increasing factional divisions and paralysis, no meaningful improvements in fighting corruption, growing interference from ex-President Karzai, and no plan for September 2016 and its aftermath.

Quite aside from the fighting, 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.

While it is not possible to address all of the problems shaped by the failures in Afghan governance involved in depth, Figure 9 illustrates some in summary form. It is also clear that reports of such failings are recognized in other U.S. government reporting that does not focus specifically on the war.
The U.S. State Department country report on human rights practices in Afghanistan for 2015 – which issued in the spring of 2016 – noted that:68

The most significant human rights problems were widespread violence, including indiscriminate attacks on civilians by armed insurgent groups; armed insurgent groups’ killings of persons affiliated with the government; torture and abuse of detainees by government forces; widespread disregard for the rule of law and little accountability for those who committed human rights abuses; and targeted violence of and endemic societal discrimination against women and girls.

Other human rights problems included extrajudicial killings by security forces; ineffective government investigations of abuse and torture by local security forces; poor prison conditions; arbitrary arrest and detention, including of women accused of so-called moral crimes; prolonged pretrial detention; judicial corruption and ineffectiveness; violations of privacy rights; restrictions on freedom of speech, press, religion, and movement; pervasive governmental corruption; underage and forced marriages; abuse of children, including sexual abuse; trafficking in persons; discrimination against persons with disabilities; discrimination and abuses against ethnic minorities; societal discrimination based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, and HIV/AIDS status; and abuse of worker rights, including forced labor and child labor.

Widespread disregard for the rule of law and official impunity for those who committed human rights abuses were serious problems. The government did not consistently or effectively prosecute abuses by officials, including security forces.

… There were reports of impunity and lack of accountability by security forces throughout the year. According to observers, ALP and ANP personnel were largely unaware of their responsibilities and defendants’ rights under the law. Accountability of NDS and ANP officials for torture and abuse was weak, not transparent, and rarely enforced. Independent judicial or external oversight of the NDS and ANP in the investigation and prosecution of crimes or misconduct, including torture and abuse, was limited. There were no known prosecutions as following a 2013 government investigation into allegations of abuse and torture by ANDSF members.

There were some prosecutions. In October ANDSF personnel accused of sexual assault during a clearing operation were tried and convicted, and each was sentenced to six years in prison. In December 2014 the 203rd Corps Primary Court convicted four ANA soldiers of murdering and robbing three individuals in Ghazni Province and sentenced them to death.

The law provides criminal penalties for corruption by officials. The government did not implement the law effectively, and there were reports officials frequently engaged in corrupt practices with impunity. Some low-profile corruption cases were reportedly tried successfully at the provincial level. The government made several commitments to combat corruption, including a decree in 2012 by then president Karzai. In 2013 the Attorney General’s Office created a monitoring department, as required by the decree, and it began accepting referred cases. No progress on the cases has been reported.

A 2013 law organizing the judiciary weakened the Control and Monitoring Department of the Supreme Court. The department had been considered effective in dealing with corruption within the judiciary in the districts and provinces. The new law eliminated some of the department’s key positions and its authority to conduct investigations, make arrests, and prosecute violators.

Reports indicated corruption was endemic throughout society, and flows of money from the military, international donors, and the drug trade continued to exacerbate the problem. Reports indicated many citizens believed the government had not been effective in combating corruption. Corruption and uneven governance continued to play a significant role in allowing the Taliban to exert influence and control some areas in the southern, eastern, and some northern provinces, particularly in remote areas.

According to prisoners and local NGOs, corruption was widespread across the justice system, particularly in connection with the prosecution of criminal cases and arranging release from prison. There were also reports that officials were bribed were paid to reduce prison sentences, halt an investigation, or dismiss charges outright. The practice of filing criminal complaints in regard to civil matters was commonly used to settle business disputes or extort money from wealthy international investors.
During the year there were reports of “land grabbing” by both private and public actors. The most common type occurred when businesses illegally obtained property deeds from corrupt officials and sold the deeds to unsuspecting “homeowners,” who would then be caught up in criminal prosecutions. Other reports indicated government officials grabbed land without compensation to exchange it for contracts or political favors. Occasionally provincial governments illegally confiscated land without due process or compensation to build public facilities.

Corruption: During the year there were significant developments in the case of Kabul Bank, which had been the country’s largest private financial institution prior to its collapse in a bank-fraud scandal that began to unfold in 2010. Reportedly, nearly 57 billion Afghans ($983 million) of misappropriated funds were disbursed to politicians, ministers, and politically well-connected shareholders of the bank.

In October 2014 President Ghani issued a decree ordering that the appellate court decide pending appeals by former Kabul Bank officials Sherkhan Farnood and Khalilullah Ferozi’s embezzling cases, that police arrest those who were convicted in the case but had not been incarcerated, and that the Supreme Court review the case and determine whether the scope of the case should be expanded. The decree also outlined steps to pursue the return of fraudulently acquired funds sent abroad. The decree resulted in the indictment of 17 individuals, and in November 2014 the appellate court tripled Farnood and Ferozi’s sentences to 15 years in prison. The Attorney General’s Office subsequently froze the assets of 10 companies and eight individuals involved in the bank’s collapse. In June President Ghani announced a one-week deadline for debtors to resolve unsettled debts or have their cases referred to the Attorney General’s Office for prosecution. In July the Attorney General’s Office announced a travel ban and asset freezes affecting 150 outstanding debtors. As of September the government stated that approximately $440 million of assets had been recovered.

In November, Ferozi was reportedly allowed to leave prison on a temporary basis and signed a contract with the government to invest in and develop the “Smart City” housing project in Kabul, despite his criminal conviction and incarceration. Observers stated such a transaction between the government and a convicted criminal was against the law. The deal was quickly annulled, and Ferozi was returned to prison.

There were widespread reports of corrupt behavior in the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Urban Development. In June the Attorney General’s Office announced investigations into three officials of the Ministry of Urban Development on suspicion of receiving bribes in exchange for development projects or housing assignments. In July President Ghani appointed a panel to investigate allegations of corruption in the Ministry of Education, including by officials accused of embezzling funds allocated to nonexistent schools.

There were reports the Attorney General’s Office was unwilling or unable to pursue some corrupt officials and that high-level officials who were arrested on corruption-related charges and subsequently released due to political pressure. In addition there was anecdotal evidence that corrupt officials made accusations of corruption to undermine the reputations of their opponents or deflect attention from their own misdeeds.

There were reports the Ministry of Finance sometimes compelled civil society organizations to pay fraudulent tax bills directly to corrupt officials.

Provincial police benefited financially from corruption at police checkpoints and from the narcotics industry. ANP officers reportedly paid higher-level Ministry of Interior officials for their positions and promotions. The justice system rarely pursued corruption cases, especially if they involved police, although authorities arrested and detained a provincial chief of police on drug-trafficking charges. The Ministry of Interior continued to be affected by widespread corruption, poor performance, and abuse of power by officers. Media reported in April that of nearly 2,000 complaints of misconduct to the Ministry of Interior’s Inspector General’s office, only nine were referred for legal action due to corruption within the ministry.

In addition to impunity, low salaries exacerbated corruption by officials. The international community worked with the national and provincial governance structures to address the problem of low salaries, but implementation of grade reform remained slow.

Credible sources reported local police in many areas extorted “taxes” at police checkpoints and behaved violently toward those who reluctant to pay. Truck drivers complained they had to bribe security forces, insurgents, and bandits to allow their trucks to pass.
Police reportedly demanded bribes from civilians to gain release from prison or avoid arrest. Citizens bribed corrections and detention officials to obtain release of prisoners who had not been discharged at the end of their sentences.

Governors with reported involvement in corruption, the drug trade, or records of human rights violations reportedly continued to receive executive appointments and served with relative impunity.

Financial Disclosure: The High Office of Oversight is responsible for collecting information from senior government officials on all sources and levels of personal income. The office verifies and publishes online and in mass media the personal asset declarations of the most senior officials (those covered under Article 154 of the constitution) when they assume office and when they leave. While collection and publication occurred, there was only limited progress on the verification of such declarations by independent domestic and international experts. The absence of legal penalties for omissions or misrepresentations tended to undermine a key tool for identifying wrongdoing.

In June the Ministry of Interior announced an 18-month extension of the Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan, a project that administers salary payments for the ANP in a more transparent and accountable process.

Public Access to Information: The constitution provides citizens the right to access government information, except when access might violate the rights of others. Access to information from official sources continued to be limited due to a lack of clarity regarding citizens’ rights and a lack of transparency among government institutions. In December 2014 President Ghani signed the Access to Information Law, which provides an official mechanism to request previously unavailable information from the government. NGOs and human rights organizations said the law had not been fully implemented, and some government officials reportedly failed to disclose information of public interest in an adequate manner. Observers noted concern about some provisions of the law authorities can use to withhold information for national security reasons. Integrity Watch Afghanistan indicated that the lack of clear definitions for terms such as national security and national interest could seriously affect and limit access to information.

This is not the description of a government that is serving its people properly or doing what is needed to win their “hearts and minds.” It is also not a description of key cultural differences, or of areas that need major new aid funding. Like the data shown in Figure 8 and Figure 9, the problems described in the State Department Human Rights Report, and many NGO and media reports, are indications of the changes the Afghan government should make on its own, that it must make to win, and must make to merit sustained U.S. support. An effective U.S. strategy needs to use American leverage to push the Afghan government into reform.
Figure 8: World Bank Rating of Afghan Governance: The Failure of Reform and Progress from 2001-2015

The inner, thicker blue line shows the selected country's percentile rank on each of the six aggregate governance indicators. The outer, thinner red lines show the indicate margins of error.

Figure 9: The Broader Civil Crisis in Afghanistan – Part One

UN Human Development Progress Lags by Comparison With Other Poor States: 1980-2012
(175th out of 187 Rated Countries)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HDI value</th>
<th>HDI rank</th>
<th>Life expectancy at birth</th>
<th>Expected years of schooling</th>
<th>Mean years of schooling</th>
<th>GNI per capita (PPP US$)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>0.374</td>
<td>175</td>
<td>48.1</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1,000</td>
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<td>Nepal</td>
<td>0.463</td>
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<td>59.1</td>
<td>8.9</td>
<td>3.2</td>
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<td>Pakistan</td>
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<td>7.3</td>
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<td>66.2</td>
<td>10.2</td>
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<td>59.1</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>1,633</td>
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Overall Satisfaction with Government Sharply Declining


**Figure 9: The Broader Civil Crisis in Afghanistan – Part Two**

**Table 1: Biggest Problems Affecting Youth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Central/Kabul (%)</th>
<th>East (%)</th>
<th>South East (%)</th>
<th>South West (%)</th>
<th>West (%)</th>
<th>North East (%)</th>
<th>Central/Hazarajat (%)</th>
<th>North West (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UNEMPLOYMENT</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>73</td>
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<tr>
<td>ILLITERACY</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27</td>
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<tr>
<td>POOR ECONOMY</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NO HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH</td>
<td></td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>BECOMING DRUG ADDICTS</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSECURITY</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LACK OF YOUTH’S RIGHTS</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LACK OF SCHOOLS</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Figure 9: The Broader Civil Crisis in Afghanistan – Part Three


Economic Crisis and Rising Poverty Rates

Corruption and failed governance are critical in an Afghanistan where most people have no reason to trust the government and are experiencing growing hardship. Politics, governance, and corruption are only part of the civil dimension of counterinsurgency operations that the United States must address, and where it needs to force conditionality on the Afghans. 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 constant problems.

Balanced development may be impossible in wartime, and trying to use aid money to quickly transform the Afghan economy would be a wasteful fantasy, but the Afghan government has produced plans rather than actions since 2002, and still offers limited hope at a time most Afghans are experiencing serious hardship and the economy is declining in terms of employment and rising poverty.

Nevertheless, the economic dimension is a key part of successful counterinsurgency operations. There is a clear need for Afghan economic reform and more plans and rhetoric are no substitute for action. At the same time, there is a need for adequate aid that is coordinated, effective, and tied to Afghanistan’s most urgent needs.

The World Bank View

The Afghan economy is also an area where many key metrics are available and have a clear impact. The data may sometimes be conflicting or ambiguous. The U.S. Embassy and official U.S. reports on the war do need to continuously pressure bodies like the Afghan Central Statistics Organization to be more honest and transparent, and specifically to properly describe the sources of their data, their collection efforts, and their analytic methods.69

Nevertheless, the sheer scale of Afghanistan’s current economic problems are clear, and are illustrated by the key findings of a World Bank assessment on the Afghan economy in May 2016:70

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. This has had a destabilizing effect on the social cohesion of the country, exacerbating ethnic divisions and weakening government institutions and rule of law. No meaningful, durable political settlement has been in place in Afghanistan for nearly 4 decades. In the absence of a political settlement—and buffeted by protracted conflict, severe human losses and displacement, and physical and institutional destruction over the past half century --Afghan politics has involved short-run, intra-elite bargaining among shifting groups with control over their own armed forces, where violence and the threat of violence are an integral part of the process. Administrative positions in government, as well as privileged access to economic resources—public procurement contracts, revenue sources, land, mining contracts, and proceeds from illicit economic activities, among others—are the “spoils” over which this elite bargaining has taken place.

…Afghanistan faces tremendous development challenges. GDP per-capita is among the lowest in the world, poverty is deep and widespread, and social indicators are still at very low levels. The authorities face an overriding need to prioritize interventions within tight budget constraints.

The new government has declared its commitment to address Afghanistan’s development challenges, through its paper “Realizing Self Reliance: Commitments to Reforms and Renewed Partnership” presented at the London Conference in December 2014.

…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.

**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.

  …Paradoxically, despite strong growth and improved social indicators, poverty has remained stubbornly high…A number of factors are responsible for this pattern. First, regional disparities have been considerable: from 2007 to 2011, poverty increased sharply in the Northeast region and remained stuck at high levels in the East and West Central regions. This suggests that addressing regional disparities will be important in reducing poverty going forward. Second, the poor in Afghanistan tend to live in rural areas, derive their livelihood from agriculture, and are more prone to being underemployed or employed in casual and vulnerable jobs. This suggests that reducing poverty will not only require strong employment generation, but also more stable and less vulnerable types of employment, with special attention to rural areas and agriculture in particular. Third, the poor are considerably less educated, have lower access to services, and are more vulnerable to shocks. This suggests that reducing poverty will require more targeted provision of services and efforts to mitigate shocks.

- 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.

The report also noted that,

...an unprecedented political, security, and economic transition since 2012 has led to a marked decline in economic performance and threatens the foundations of stability and progress in Afghanistan. Economic growth fell sharply to 1.5-2 percent in 2014 and 2015 as private sector confidence slumped and a fiscal crisis unfolded as declining revenues led to depleted cash reserves and accumulating arrears.

Even what appear to positive trends in the past can be misleading. An outside expert notes, however, that the 9.4% average growth in GDP was, “due largely to good harvests/rainfalls, large increases in donor grants, and U.S. and coalition troop spending.” The Bank also does not indicate what actions are necessary to achieve revenue mobilization.

**The CIA View**

Similarly, the CIA World Factbook noted in August 2016 that:71

...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.

These issues are particularly critical because Afghanistan already faces an economic crisis, and has failed so often to actually implement reform. What 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, that the current Ghani plan remains largely a plan, and that a divided Ghani-Abdullah government may not last out the year.\textsuperscript{72} It is equally important to point out that the “international community” has done virtually nothing to hold Afghanistan accountable.

The IMF View

The IMF noted in approving the three-year credit that Afghanistan had made progress in managing its monetary system, and found some areas of limited progress, but it also stated that the country was in near crisis and had not yet begun to execute a comprehensive reform program.\textsuperscript{73}

...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.

In theory, Afghanistan must now carry out reforms this to keep an IMF three-year credit. Unfortunately, IMF may be more optimistic about Afghanistan willingness and ability to do this than is realistic. As one observer notes, “the previous IMF extended credit facility arrangements (ECFs) were failures with Afghan metrics not being met (or only partially being met). Again, donors used the IMF ECFs as a reason to continue to provide funding regardless of whether the Afghan government met their obligations.” The IMF also did not address the growth in poverty since 2007, the broad failures in governance, past failures in reform, or seem to have validated some of its claims to progress.
The IMF did, however, issue a report in July 2016 that provided an updated assessment of the impact of the withdrawal of most outside combat forces in 2014.74

**Afghanistan is undergoing a political, security, and economic transition that is posing difficult challenges for the government.** Continued insecurity, political uncertainty, endemic corruption, weak institutions, an infrastructure deficit, weak human capital, and a large illicit narcotics sector are the salient factors preventing robust and inclusive economic development…Growth, having averaged 11½ percent in 2007-12, collapsed to 1½ percent in 2013–15 as the size of the International Security Assistance Force stationed in the country fell from 130,000 to 13,000. An estimated 500,000 jobs were lost in recent years following the troop withdrawal. Political uncertainty and rising insecurity compounded this drag on economic activity…Prospects for a peace agreement with insurgents are uncertain and violence is on the rise….Political uncertainty persists as the power sharing arrangement between President Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah, and therefore the government’s cohesion, continues to be tested….Emigration emerged as a major issue in 2015, with violence and weak economic conditions being the main push factors.1 These pressures have recently abated

… **Economic activity is weak.** GDP growth continued to decline in 2015, reaching 0.8 percent after 1.3 percent and 3.9 percent in 2014 and 2013, respectively. A further deterioration in security conditions, the continued impact of the troop withdrawal, delays in budget execution, and unfavorable weather lowering agricultural output were the major factors behind low growth. Inflation, after remaining in negative territory for some time in 2015, rose to 5 percent year-on-year in May due to the Afghani’s depreciation.2 Money growth and credit to the private sector recently accelerated as well, but from a low base.

**Budget indicators are improving.** Domestic revenues increased by 28 percent year-on-year in the first five months of 2016, on account of measures introduced in the second half of 2015. Operating budget execution3 improved owing to acceleration in procurement in the security sector and a pick-up in wage and pension payments. Development budget execution, however, has not picked up (despite the authorities’ plans to increase it over time from 53 to 80 percent of the budgeted amount), reflecting delays in procurement and submission of invoices. The overall budget recorded a surplus of about 2.5 percent of annual GDP after grants, and the treasury’s discretionary cash balance increased to over Af 30 billion (2.5 percent of GDP), equivalent to 1.5 months of operating spending.

**The trade and current account (before official grants) deficits remain large, although data deficiencies complicate an assessment.** Staff estimates the former at about 37 percent of GDP and the latter at about 33 percent of GDP in 2015. While imports of goods declined by about 10 percent in 2015, exports of goods, consisting mainly of agricultural products and excluding opium and internal sales to nonresidents, declined by about 15 percent on account of unfavorable weather and disruptions in transportation as well as falling prices. Anecdotal evidence suggests some improvements in these factors since the beginning of 2016,4 but given Afghanistan’s large dependence on imports,5 the impact on the trade deficit will be limited. The current account deficit continues to be more than fully covered by official grants.

**Exchange rate pressures decreased in the first five months of 2016 as emigration and related capital outflows have decelerated.** The Afghani depreciated slightly against the U.S. dollar, by one percent relative to end-2015. Da Afghanistan Bank (DAB) continues to supply foreign exchange to the domestic FX markets,6 but its sales volumes have fallen: US$0.7 billion in the first five months against US$1.2 billion in the same period a year ago. Gross international reserves cover almost nine months of imports.

**The financial sector remains vulnerable and plays a limited role in financial intermediation.** The sector is marked by lingering governance concerns, deteriorating asset quality, and weak profitability. Public confidence, shattered by the 2010 Kabul Bank fraud and collapse, has not fully recovered yet. The high liquidity and solvency ratios are misleading and reflect the fact that banks do not play their intermediation role, with an average system-wide loan-to-deposit ratio of only 19.2 percent and 4.6 percent for the three state-owned commercial banks (SOCBs) as of December 2015.

… **The outlook remains challenging.** The perilous security situation and political uncertainties remain the key constraints to improved economic outcomes, crowding out development spending, undermining private investment, and complicating the implementation of reforms. Endemic corruption reduces economic efficiency, undermines institutions, and fosters inequality.
Potential for medium-term growth is likely to be resource-based. Past work by the World Bank identified agriculture and mining as core to a development strategy. With supportive policy reforms, the agricultural sector could contribute to growth and employment relatively soon. Development of the mining sector is more distant, as it depends on an improvement in the investment climate, renegotiation of several existing contracts, and a robust fiscal regime for extractive industries to assuage investor concerns over corruption. The impending construction of the CASA line will provide for transmission corridors and the potential for exporting electricity. The authorities have noted that trade and regional integration could be a growth driver and aim to develop Afghanistan into a trade and transportation hub for the region. However, such integration is likely slow to materialize.

The Need for Actual Reform

The IMF has also highlighted the need to actually carry out reforms rather than repeat the pattern set by of more than a decade of promised reforms that were never meaningfully implemented. Its July 2016 report also stated that:

...Staff noted that a critical mass of reforms is needed to lay the foundation for robust and inclusive growth. The payoff from reforms is likely to be gradual, based on the experience of other fragile countries, and difficult to forecast, particularly given high insecurity. Growth has shown high volatility in the past, and the distorting effect of drug production and trafficking is an additional source of uncertainty.

The nine-month Staff Monitored Program (SMP) approved in May 2015 was successfully completed in April 2016. The SMP aimed at addressing fiscal and banking vulnerabilities, preserving macroeconomic stability, improving prospects for inclusive growth, and building a track record for a future IMF financial arrangement.

... The program aims to preserve macro-financial stability by implementing prudent fiscal, monetary, and financial policies, and by maintaining external buffers and a flexible exchange rate regime. The program’s major elements are as follows:

Fiscal reforms: On the revenue side, the priorities include strengthening current tax policies and administration, and customs revenue collection control and capacity. On the expenditure side, priorities include improving formulation, execution, and reporting of the budget; ensuring a pro-growth re-composition of public spending while safeguarding social and other priority spending; and strengthening commitment control and allotment processes to better manage cash and improve transparency.

Anti-corruption measures and financial governance: Strong anti-corruption measures are crucial for Afghanistan to build trust and accountability, minimize revenue leakages, and improve the business environment. The authorities have taken steps to improve the anti-corruption framework since 2014, and plan to align the legal framework for anti-corruption with international standards as well as improve enforcement and transparency—notably by strengthening the asset declaration regime and its implementation. The authorities plan to enhance implementation of the Anti-Money Laundering/Combating the Financing of Terrorism (AML/CFT) framework, in particular the regulation on currency reporting at borders and the fit and proper regulation.

Policies to preserve macro-financial stability: The ECF arrangement will aim to gradually reduce underlying fiscal and external imbalances to prepare for a time when donor aid declines. Buffers—low public debt and ample international reserves—will remain strong to absorb adverse shocks. The budget will increasingly favor development spending to support a recovery in growth, while financial sector policies will aim to strengthen vulnerable and weak banks and reform the state-owned commercial banks. On the latter, the program incorporates measures to complete the resolution of the 2010 Kabul Bank crisis through recapitalizing New Kabul Bank and reducing the central bank’s lender of last resort exposure to Kabul Bank. Monetary policy will continue to be focused on maintaining price stability and a flexible exchange rate regime, while fostering confidence in the domestic currency in the context of high dollarization.

... The program, however, carries some risks including (i) a deterioration in the security situation; (ii) a shortfall in donor aid; and (iii) increased political uncertainty, particularly with regard to elections scheduled for the fall. These risks, were they to materialize, could lead to lower growth, unexpected financing gaps, and problems with program implementation.
Part of the problems is that the World Bank and IMF have a far better record in their diagnostics than in pressing hard for realistic reform programs. One group of expert advisors notes that,

> The problem with the IMF and World Bank projections is that they are based on fantastical political, security, economic conditions that were, are, and will never be met. The goals are not just divorced from Afghanistan’s immediate needs as CSIS writes, but are also divorced from reality. What is worse, and arguably most egregious, is that they both are not honest in their public assessments and spin their reports so as not to offend/embarrass the Afghan government or risk a reduction in donor aid.

It has also long been clear that that most international and national civil aid efforts have problems incoming to grips with war. Far too many such organizations have planned and acted as if ongoing wars did not dominate the actions of government and it is possible to focus on development in spite of an ongoing insurgency or civil conflict, or for the unknown time a conflict might end.

Both the World Bank and IMF have also tended to ignore the real world challenges raise by their field teams, the political and social constraints on given countries, and the need to maintain an viable economic life during the period of reform, and leap from good diagnostics to calls for impossible levels of near term progress.

What is clearly needed is a functioning partnership in the field that includes the World Bank and/or IMF, the host country, and the military and that is operational – rather than a visit and a planning effort based on headquarters-driven rhetoric and goals. There is also a need for the kind of transparency that allows for public comment and review, for open discussion of reforms and their progress, and review of the use of aid. Honesty does not yet exist in Afghanistan and trust is no substitute for transparency.

The World Bank and IMF and World Bank have also shown in the past that their staffs in the field do have core competence in economic reform, and could be far more effective partners to host countries working in the field in a transparent multinational effort. World Bank field teams have already done good work in Afghanistan, and if they work with credible Afghan experts, they could help make both reform and aid levels more effective and avoid setting goals divorced from Afghanistan’s immediate needs or that are unaffordable.

The United States needs to press for such effective team work, and also needs to work with other donors to develop a common front in making it clear to Afghans that commitments to Afghanistan are conditional on reform and Afghan ability to create enough political unity to offer a solid prospect of winning. the U.S. not only needs to size its effort to one that can suit the actual conditions in the fighting, it needs to make its support conditional in ways that force Afghans to choose, and that make it clear that the U.S. is tying together the civil-military dimensions of counterinsurgency operations in ways where the host country must assume its full share of responsibility.

**Acute Population Pressure, a Massive “Youth Bulge” and an Employment Crisis**

The need for such action is reinforced by the fact that classic governance and economics are only part of the civil dimension of the war. 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 is obvious from the World Bank and IMF data that the steady increase in the poverty
rate has since made the situation worse, as does the flight of better-educated Afghans outside the country – the so-called “brain drain” often reported in the media, and that lead to employment competition between donors/implementing partners and the Afghan government for the remaining educated. The departure of many wealthier and better educated Afghans poses a growing problem at the same point that youth unemployment has reached the crisis level, and poverty levels have been rising for nearly half a decade.

These data are of particular importance because so little attention is paid to Afghan population growth and pressure. There are major differences between estimates and the Afghan data are often useless projections made by an over-precise computer model that does not draw on any credible census data. The U.S. Census Bureau is almost certainly largely correct in estimating the trend, however in saying that 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. Similarly, the CIA is probably broadly correct in estimating that the current dependency ratio is 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. The estimated numbers for 14 years of age or younger are: 41.47% (male 6,861,021/female 6,644,780) and are 22.41% (male 3,716,738/female 3,579,701) for 15-24 years of age. At least 755,000 Afghans reach job age a year, and 380,000 are males.

These figures are particularly important because unemployment and disguised unemployment may not be measurable in statistical terms, but are broadly agreed to have reached massive levels. The lack of arable land, security, predictable rainfall, and insecurity in the countryside have combined to create far higher levels of urbanization and urban slums, and the poverty rate continues to increase. The CIA estimates that urbanization was still only 26.7% in 2015, but this compared to some 15-17% in 2010, and security and economic pressures have raised the rate of increase to 3.96% a year in 2015.

This, in turn, means that much of the intake to the Afghan security forces and civil government is driven more by the need for any form of employment than loyalty or dedication. These changes also affect a deeply fragmented society. The CIA notes that, “current statistical data on the sensitive subject of ethnicity in Afghanistan is not available, and ethnicity data from small samples of respondents to opinion polls are not a reliable alternative. Afghanistan's 2004 constitution recognizes 14 ethnic groups: Pashtun, Tajik, Hazara, Uzbek, Baloch, Turkmen, Nuristani, Pamiri, Arab, Gujar, Brahui, Qizilbash, Aimaq, and Pashai (2015).

Linguistic fragmentation adds to these problems, as well as the power broker problem and regional divisions: “Afghan Persian or Dari (official) 50%, Pashto (official) 35%, Turkic languages (primarily Uzbek and Turkmen) 11%, 30 minor languages (primarily Balochi and Pashai) 4%, much bilingualism, but Dari functions as the lingua franca...the Turkic languages Uzbek and Turkmen, as well as Balochi, Pashai, Nuristani, and Pamiri are the third official languages in areas where the majority speaks them.

So do sectarian divisions in a country that is some 99.7% Muslim. A 2009 estimate put the sectarian divisions at Sunni 84.7 - 89.7%, Shia 10 - 15%), other 0.3%. There has been at least a limited increase in Sunni vs. Shi’ite (largely Hazara) violence and tension in recent years, as well as internal Sunni violence over religious orthodoxy.
These same issues further divide the security forces and the government, and lead to tension when a different ethnic groups operates in another part of the country, creates problems in command promotion, and can affect the flow of reinforcements, supplies, and payments. They also explain why the World Bank sees such pressures as the second of the three most critical constraints to Afghan development.86

*The second constraint is the demographic and geographic landscape.* Afghanistan faces high population growth and a youth bulge, with 400,000 entrants into the labor force each year. The proportion of the population aged 15 or below is a remarkable 51.3 percent, making Afghanistan one of the youngest countries in Asia. These demographic pressures are exacerbated by significant numbers of returning internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees. All this will require strong and sustained job creation and growth, without which large numbers of working age Afghans will become unemployed or underemployed, thus exacerbating poverty. In addition, significant demographic and geographic disparities exist in employment generation and access to services. The widespread exclusion of women from economic participation represents large economic costs and deserves special attention. Addressing these disparities is critical to ensuring that growth is more inclusive going forward. Finally, the rapid rate of urbanization and Afghanistan’s mountainous terrain with remote communities suggests that improving the provision of urban services and enhancing connectivity will be important going forward.

**Dealing with Narcotics by Omission and Denial**

The World Bank, IMF, and CIA economic analyses all fail to fully address and attempt to properly quantify the critical impact of narcotics on the Afghan economy, politics, government, and corruption. The CIA ignores the fact that Afghanistan is very much a narco-economy in its Factbook – although it does note that “criminality” is a key aspect of its economy. The World Bank and IMF tend to downplay its importance and ignore it in their data – largely for political reasons and the need to work with the Afghan government.

Other sources – including most U.S. government reporting – limit their assessment to talking about counterdrug programs in terms of production and eradication – rather than their economic impact. They often focus on estimates based largely on farm gate prices, which are – inherently ridiculous estimates because they ignore the added value drugs acquire once they leave the grower.

Afghanistan is not only one of the most corrupt countries in the world, it is one dominated by power brokers who combine corruption and the misuse of government power and the various elements of the security forces with the exploitation of family networks, ethnic and sectarian tensions and loyalties, tribalism, and drug trafficking, bribes and manipulating the enforcement of drug eradication at a massive level tied to international networks and sales. These groups of power brokers interact with the Taliban and other insurgent drug producers and sellers, sometimes in de facto cooperation in conflicts in areas like the Helmand where the fighting can also limit drug production.

Pretending that drug revenues and the incentive to grow drugs stop at the farm gate is simply absurd, as is the constant effort to describe Afghanistan as a democracy driven by Kabul, rather than as a mosaic of competing power brokers, exploiting regional, tribal, ethnic, and sectarian loyalties and tensions for their own interests.

It is also a country where even when drug production drops in given areas, it often increases in others where insurgents compete with pro-government power brokers for control of the trade, and where counternarcotics efforts often take credit for shifts caused by demand, disease, fighting, and rainfall.
This helps explain why the U.S. State Department’s 2015 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report (INCSR) report for 2015 noted that:  

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 are more reassuring, and there are reports that opium production dropped significantly in 2015, but this estimate is based on data issued by the Afghan Ministry of Counter Narcotics.

The trends involved are summarized in Figure 10, but they are uncertain, and most such changes in gross national output in the past have had little to do with eradication and farmer incentives, and have been driven by fluctuations in international demand, Afghan rainfall, poppy blight, and the local security situation.

In any case, it seems 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%.

As the July 2016 Quarterly Report by SIGAR notes:

As of June 30, 2016, the United States has provided $8.5 billion for counternarcotics efforts in Afghanistan since 2002. Nonetheless, Afghanistan remains the world’s leading producer of opium, providing 80% of the world’s output over the past decade, according to the United Nations

...The United Nations on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) released its World Drug Report 2016 in June 2016. Though Afghanistan accounts for nearly two-thirds of the planet’s illicit opium cultivation, it played a significant part in the world’s opium production decline of 38% from the previous year. Afghanistan’s estimated opium production declined 48% to 3,300 metric tons from its 2014 level of 6,400 tons. Its opium-cultivation level of 183,000 hectares decreased 18% from its 2014 total of 224,000 hectares. UNODC attributes the decline mainly to poor harvests in the southern provinces.424 UNODC did change its methodology between 2014 and 2015; it is unclear how much that change factored into the reported decline.
UNODC cautions that the changing methodology could make changes seem greater than represented. Production and cultivation results had been rising for the past decade.

...The United States promised more than a year ago to issue a revised U.S. counternarcotics strategy that takes into account the new security situation with the ANDSF in charge of battling the insurgency. INL informed SIGAR last quarter that the revised U.S. strategy will continue to prioritize building Afghanistan’s capacity to counter narcotics, and will support Afghanistan’s counternarcotics goals and objectives, as outlined in the government’s National Drug Action Plan (NDAP). INL reports that the United States worked closely with the Afghan government in the development of the NDAP, and is committed to supporting its implementation.

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 farm gate 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 farm gate 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.

**Figure 10: Afghan Opium Cultivation and Production Since 2008**

Like so many aspects of the data on Afghanistan—education, progress in the role of women, medical services, and life expectancy— a failure to honestly and objectively address narcotics as a key aspect of Afghan reality and/or to “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 on the civil side, whether tolerating Afghan dependence on opium is a near to mid-term necessity for any success, and what the priority really is for U.S. action.
In practice, it seems likely that any aero-based assessment will conclude that progress in counternarcotics will be slow at best and require major progress in the security dimension and stabilizing the Afghan economy over a period that may well take a decade or more. It may also well conclude that action should focus on the senior power brokers and the networks in trafficking and not on growers and eradication. Afghanistan is not Columbia, but both countries may well have one thing in common. The trafficker, not the grower, is the key source of the problem, and the core of drug economics does not end at the farm gate, it begins there.

Moving Towards Civil and Economic Reform

There is an important difference between focusing on new forms civil development and focusing on the urgent need to survive a war. This is particularly true in a counterinsurgency mission. Efforts to transform any key aspect of society are difficult at the best of times, and generally impossible in mid-conflict. This is particularly true if the effort at transformation comes from the outside, is based on different values, and requires major differences in politics, governance, ideology, or economics.

A Grim History of Past Failure

The U.S. and other donors never really addressed these realities in planning their original aid efforts. They did not honestly address the limits to the capability and integrity of the Afghan government, or adapt the civil aid programs to the steady rise of the threat and the intensity of the fighting after 2006-2007. Far too many aid efforts were either shaped around given projects, regardless of real world needs and their impact on the fighting, or became efforts to transform Afghanistan at the political governance, economic, and societal level in ways that would have been impractical, and ignored Afghan needs and values, even in peacetime.

These not only included economic efforts like the “new silk road,” mining, and pipelines; but areas with a major impact of political stability and the fighting like massive changes to “rule of law,” efforts at community policing, elections, counternarcotics, and the pace of efforts to change the role of women. Rather than focusing on critical human needs in country at war with development standards well below Bangladesh, and using a combination of reforms and aid tailored accordingly, key elements of the civil effort consistently overreached without effective implementation plans, control of funds, measures of effectiveness, and the transparency needed to limit corruption.

Ambitious international aid conferences that traded fund-raising pledges from donors for Afghan promises of reform that were never kept only made things worse. While some of the local Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) efforts both involved a real civil-military partnership -- and were limited enough so the money and effectiveness could be easily managed and judged -- far too many projects and projects had no clear link to the nation’s broader immediate needs and priorities, any actual implementation plan, Afghan government capabilities, and the realities of war.

Every country, institution, and NGO tended to fail in different ways -- although most efforts made the same mistakes the military in having tours of duty that were too short for those involved to establish the in-country expertise and contacts they needed. Many -- if not most -- aid efforts focused on rapid completions and spending rates, rather than properly controlling the money.
The U.S. did a particularly poor job of creating real-world, integrated civil-military plans, setting overall priorities, and managing money and measures of effectiveness. “Whole of government” efforts failed. Coordination between the U.S military and civil side was poor, and equally bad between the State Department and USAID. Worse, parts of the Embassy team pressed to avoid such efforts and limit the Embassy’s role to that of a “normal embassy,” while it became clear that USAID simply did not have the core competence in large-scale economic planning present in the World Bank and IMF.

Moreover, UNAMA never seriously addressed its mission of coordinating aid effects, and countries proven unable or unwilling to actively press for the implementation of Afghan reform plans, and failed to use the IMF and World Bank effectively in planning, reviewing, and leveraging such efforts.

**Shaping a Future Around Conditionality and Reform**

Perhaps fortunately, the U.S. no longer has the option of making major increases in aid money. It seems almost certain that U.S. domestic politics now would prevent such spending, and the U.S. no longer has the option of providing massive economic aid as a tool in armed nation building and incentive to the Afghan government. Moreover, any such aid 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. In is unlikely that it could have much impact until 2019 at the earliest.

At the same time, it is far from clear that the United States knows any more about how to plan and administer such a program than it did in the past. The State Department’s FY2017 aid request is sufficiently incoherent and decoupled from the issues flagged by the World Bank, IMF, and CIA to raise serious questions.

Once again, it is 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.91

What the U.S. can do, however, is shape the civil side of its aid efforts as effectively as possible to ensure that Afghanistan can survive the civil strains of the war. Conditionality does not require U.S. plans if existing Afghan plans are actually implemented. Afghan reform plans could accomplish a great deal if they were actually implemented. State and USAID can certainly review the implementation of such reforms and work with the IMF and World Bank to use their reform planning skills. The U.S. helped set up these institutions to do the task and it is far better to leverage international efforts than conditionality on a U.S.-only basis.

*For all of the problems in past Afghan aid efforts at economic reform, the key problem has never been that Afghan plans reforms didn’t work, it has always been that they were never really implemented.* The challenge today also is not development, but rather making the nation work as it is in spite of ongoing conflict.

Here, a comment by an expert observer of Afghan development efforts notes that,

…the National Unity Government is less than two years into an unprecedented reform program, *Realizing Self-Reliance* (pdf at that link). When it was presented at the 2014 London Conference on Afghanistan, it
was praised and endorsed by the IMF, World Bank, and donor governments, including the US -- in particular the US Treasury. The National Unity Government had made a clear-eyed diagnosis of the situation and designed a sequenced plan of achievable reforms, signaling to the world that this government was serious about turning the page on a new chapter for the country.

Even under the best of conditions, the NUG was never going to be declaring success by now. But as you know, conditions have been the opposite of favorable. Its first two years of governing have been against the backdrop of an economic crisis triggered by the withdrawal of the international peacekeeping force (an estimated 500,000 jobs lost and the abrupt end to years of massive spending), the spoiler behavior of Pakistan, the fact that the Taliban had years to prepare for the heavily advertised 2014 drawdown, and the challenge of working within an untested form of government that requires two former rivals to compromise on every major decision without an agreed set of rules of the game for resolution of differences. And throughout, powerful forces that thrived in the chaos and corruption of the previous era have worked to oppose and derail planned reforms.

One implication for Afghanistan’s partners, including the US would be -- if it accepts the credibility and desirability of the NUG reform agenda, and commitment of the President and a growing team to its success – to develop a strategy as to how to maximize the chances of success of the reform agenda, and where possible to mitigate obstacles and constraints to that agenda.

Despite the immense challenges, some positive changes and measurable progress have occurred in several areas – revenue, corruption, service delivery, trading partners, job creation, infrastructure and more. The needle may not have moved on the big data points this year, but that, I believe, has a reasonable chance of change in 2017.

To take one example, in Public Finance Management, a new 5-year rolling plan is in place, authored by the Afghan directors of each of the 70 or so directorates in the Ministry of Finance, using a team-based performance method. All but three of the directorates in the MoF had been ignored up to now. Other examples: Dr. Mohammed Qayoumi has taken the helm of the infrastructure portfolio and has been conducting triage on which projects can be finished and where operations and maintenance support is needed, and has, for example, overseen the completion of Salma Dam (renamed the Afghan-India Friendship Dam) and others. The National Solidarity Program has been redesigned, updated, and refinanced. A lot of this is the "invisible work" that could lay the foundations for change in the months ahead.

In essence, there is a genuine reform agenda which a core team of leaders is deeply committed to -- despite the imperfections of the NUG arrangement and the obstacles -- and the US government could do a better job at identifying ways to accelerate and support this agenda rather than unwittingly putting brakes on it.

**Only Helping Nations that Can Help Themselves**

These points are critical because the World Bank, IMF, and donors like the U.S. can only aid the Afghans, not substitute for their willingness to act. If there is any overall lesson of development in the post-Colonial era, it is that outside donors cannot help a nation that cannot and will not help itself. At the same time, aid has often helped nations that developed and implemented credible plans with the help of International Organization or on their own.

In the case of Afghanistan—as in many other cases that do or do not involve high levels of internal violence – conditionality should not mean imposing plans (or dreams) from the outside, or throwing money at projects, programs, and objective set largely by the donors, and particularly without an overall plan that integrates the civil and military efforts when a nation is at war.

It should give primacy to steady and systematic reform over time that is implemented within the limits imposed by conflict in cases like Afghanistan. It should focus both reform and aid on meeting urgent current needs first – not changing the economy, society, basic structure of governance, or policing and the rule of law. The flow of aid money and other outside expenditure
should be tightly controlled to avoid waste and fueling corruption, and creating both a distorted national budget and pattern of dependence on outside aid that inevitably cannot be funded as donor fatigue sets in.

“Nation building” should mean giving every possible effort to helping a nation develop its own plans and finding ways to ensure those plans are implemented in ways that actually work. Conditionality in controlling the flow of aid is one form of leverage. Providing outside diplomatic encouragement, technical support, and a public commitment to helping a country find and pursue its own path is another.

All of these efforts also have to be tailored to deal with the realities of war and national differences by ethnic group, tribe, sect, and region. Weak, divided state in the early stages of development have little tolerance for error in peace time, and even less in war. Countries like Afghanistan have no tolerance or need for approaches to “nation building” that are not conflict oriented.

Good intentions that involving changing a nation – particularly donor country-by-country or NGO-by-NGO good intentions – may not be the road to hell. But, they are an all too common road to failure. This is particularly true in wartime, where civil action has to take security into full account, along with the need for humanitarian action. The priority is to make existing institutions and systems work as well as possible. It is also to restore faith in the government, limit corruption and waste, and do so in ways that meet the values and priorities of all the nation’s citizens.

Realistic conditionality will have other benefits. Reforms limited to actual Afghan needs and capabilities will also sharply limit the call for aid funds than can only be misused or wasted. The U.S can almost certainly afford to help Afghanistan deal with its worst problems and its people’s worst grievances if such conditionality is enforced, and such progress will make the politics of getting the funds far easier.

Using International Organizations Where Possible

Only the U.S. can now take the lead in pushing for this kind of conditionality. It will be hard enough to get other donors to sustain their efforts, and the U.S. may be the only power that can tie together the civil and military efforts with some clear understanding of how warfighting priorities interact with civil needs.

To put it bluntly, however, the U.S. has not shown it has the ability to carry out meaningful development planning, and help Afghanistan execute its own reforms and plans, as distinguished from project aid and humanitarian relief. The U.S. State Department and USAID have failed in these areas in the past in both Afghanistan and Iraq. The State Department keeps trying to revert to a normal embassy in an abnormal war, and USAID seems to be unable to look beyond its own project oriented efforts.

These limits to U.S. core competence present strong arguments for using international organizations like the World Bank and IMF -- instead of a donor-nation oriented approach. The same arguments apply however, to use the right international organizations. The UN has diplomatic and peacemaking value, but has proved totally incompetent in planning and coordinating development and nation building. UNAMA has been a total failure in such efforts, and the UN has fallen short in far too many previous cases.
The World Bank and IMF will also, however, need to make changes in their approach. As has been shown earlier, the World Bank and IMF have made useful and realistic assessment of the problems in the Afghan economy and structure of governance, but they will need to focus on Afghan needs for reform that closely align with Afghan government reform plans.

Efforts to use the World Bank and IMF will require them to show they can meet four important conditions:

- First, that they will setup field teams that stay in country, push the host country into taking the lead and responsibility, and work with country donors and the military. What is needed is an Afghan-led civil-military effort that has enough outside pressures, and checks and balances, to actually work.
- Second, that they are willing to operate in a combat and high risk environment.
- Third, that they do not treat their role as that of a client to the host country government, but rather as willing to support conditionality in terms of sensitive issues like corruption, narco-trafficking, and host-country willingness and competence in carrying out both reform and development.
- And fourth, they are equally willing to address failures by given donor countries and NGOs to coordinate and manage their aid programs rather than serve their own interests – whether bureaucratic or political.

If the World Bank and/or IMF can meet these conditions, they will offer a way to separate the civil effort from the role of given donors, a forum where the host country can get more neutral and expert advice and assessments, a way for all donors to contribute without become subordinate to another country, and where donors do not have to take responsibility for criticizing the host country.

If they cannot, the U.S. will have to take the lead in trying to create something similar whether it likes “nation building” or not. The current military-centric effort denies one of the most fundamental aspects of counterinsurgency in a failed state, and at best is a recipe for tactical success and strategic and grand strategic failure. In practice, it may well lead to failure at the tactical level as well.

**Requirements for Civil Aid Funding**

It is not possible to provide any reliable estimate of the cost of such efforts without the kind of net assessment that has been called for throughout this study. Afghan needs for civil aid spending are hard to anticipate without better plans and analysis, and current estimates vary from source-to-source.

A World Bank analysis issued in February 2016 does, however, provides the key trend data shown in Figure 11 and Figure 12, and its assessment of Afghanistan’s fiscal stability problems is one that many experts would agree with in general terms.\(^9^2\)

- After a decade of strong revenue performance, domestic revenues fell from a peak of 11.6 percent in 2011 to 8.7 percent in 2014, before rebounding to 10.4 percent in 2015. The decline in revenue collection was driven by the economic slowdown and weaknesses in enforcement and compliance. Despite a number of austerity measures put in place in 2014 to contain the crisis, the government faced an unfinanced fiscal gap of about $350 million in 2014, which led to accumulated arrears of around $200 million and depleted cash reserves.

- The authorities put in place a number of new revenue measures in 2015 and exercised expenditure restraint which, along with an increase in discretionary budget aid, helped improve the cash position at end-2015. Despite the improvements in 2015, the 2014 fiscal crisis significantly weakened the overall fiscal outlook, with financing constraints expected to remain considerable in the medium term. Expenditure pressures are growing and the potential for further improving revenues remains unclear.
The medium term fiscal outlook is daunting due to extraordinary expenditure needs, weak revenues, and a drawdown in donor aid. Afghanistan faces extraordinary expenditure needs in the areas of security, service delivery, infrastructure development, and operations and maintenance (O&M). As off-budget expenditures gradually shift onto the budget over the next several years, on-budget expenditures are projected to increase from 26 percent of GDP in 2014 to 35.1 percent of GDP by 2018. The medium term fiscal framework for Afghanistan is based on improving revenues gradually replacing international aid. However, as revenues deteriorated rapidly during 2012-14, the medium term revenue trajectory that can be expected for 2016-18 is also considerably lower, while expenditure needs remain high. As such, unless revenue performance improves considerably, a sizable fiscal deficit will likely persist over the medium-term. This will lead to difficulty in meeting critical civilian operating and development expenditures, which would adversely affect social stability and development progress.

Revenues in Afghanistan are low when compared to other countries in South and Central Asia, as well as other fragile, low-income countries. While revenues in South Asia are generally low, that of Afghanistan is among the lowest in the region. Afghanistan’s revenues are also among the lowest for any low-income, fragile state…Preliminary analysis by Bank staff suggests that Afghanistan is collecting significantly less than its revenue potential. Even with the existing tax policy and legal framework, potential revenue could be 3-5 percentage points of GDP higher than the actual levels collected, pointing toward considerable weaknesses in tax administration and compliance.

The recent decline in revenue collection can be attributed to both the economic slowdown and weak enforcement in customs and tax administration. Customs duties, tax revenues, and nontax revenues have all declined as share of GDP since 2011. The decline in customs duties from 3.6 percent of GDP in 2011 to 2.2 percent in 2014 is particularly marked. With the economic slowdown, the structure of imports has shifted, with a decline in fuel, vehicles, and other luxury and higher tariff items. However, leakages and weaknesses in enforcement are a large part of the problem, particularly given that the decline in collections began in 2012 when economic growth was very strong. Increased uncertainty from the political and security transition has encouraged greater rent seeking and tax evasion. Improving revenue collection going forward is one of the most important economic policy priorities facing Afghanistan today.

…Improving revenue mobilization in large part involves fighting corruption and addressing chronic weaknesses in governance. Strengthening enforcement and fighting corruption in customs includes a number of technical solutions such as improving HR management, introducing additional randomized post-inspections, mobilizing post clearance audit in major custom houses, establishing additional border crossing points to reduce border leakages, further rolling out ASYCUDA, and strengthening the enforcement powers of the customs authority. However, the implementation of these technical solutions needs to be proactively backed by broad spectrum of relevant actors in the context of Afghanistan’s fragmented political system and high-level political support. Failing this, the technical solutions are likely to produce limited or no result, in the face of entrenched vested interests from local and national elites.

The World Bank does indicate that key reforms can help. It also notes quite frankly, however, that:

Even under optimistic scenarios of revenue mobilization, Afghanistan will continue to need substantial donor grant aid for the next decade. Total estimated on and off budget spending in 2013 was 55 percent of GDP, with donor grants financing about 45 percent of GDP. Going forward, even assuming some consolidation of security expenditures and an optimistic scenario for revenue mobilization, Afghanistan will continue to need grant aid of about 25 percent of GDP or $7 billion in 2018.

Any sharper drawdown in aid flows during 2015-18 will have a serious negative impact on economic growth and social outcomes. In fact, if a consolidation of security spending does not materialize and improvements in revenue mobilization are only modest, the grant aid needed in 2018 could be significantly larger.

As such, it will be critically important to...Secure adequate civilian and security donor assistance to finance the large fiscal gap (expected to last through 2025) and work with development partners to
maintain a predictable flow of financing. Under a deteriorating scenario of uncertainty and conflict, it may be necessary to mobilize urgent donor aid, which would contribute to the global public good of stabilizing Afghanistan.

If Afghanistan is to survive the war, it will need both to reform its budget process and have substantial donor aid. As the World Bank also notes, it will also have to make hard choices between security and civil needs:

Large security expenditure obligations are a major challenge for fiscal stability and risk crowding out critical civilian operational and development spending. On-budget security spending increased from 26 percent of total expenditures (incl. recurrent and total development) in 2006 to 48 percent in 2014. At the same time, civilian expenditures not only declined as a share of total spending, but also dropped from 16 percent of GDP in 2006 to 13 percent in 2014. The rise in security spending comes as a result of an increase in the size of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), increases in security operation needs, and a gradual shift of security costs that were previously financed off budget by donors onto the budget. However, a large portion of security spending still remains off budget and is projected to come on budget only over time. In this context, rapidly rising security spending and constrained resources risk crowding out critical civilian operating and development spending, as illustrated by the “perfect storm” in 2014.

As revenues have declined, domestic financing of security has been sustained at the cost of squeezing domestic financing of critical civilian spending. Although revenues declined from $2 billion in 2013 to $1.7 billion in 2014, the contribution to security increased from $583 million to $754 million. This has come at the cost of reducing the government’s ability to meet its civilian financing needs. Revenue contribution to civilian spending dropped from $1.4 billion in 2013 to slightly below $1 billion in 2014. While the Afghan National Security Forces (including Army and Police) are financed in large part by foreign grants (with a domestic contribution component), non-ANSF security costs are fully financed by revenues. In fact, non-ANSF security costs have increased four-fold over the past five years, from only $55 million in 2009 to $220 million in 2014, which were entirely met by domestic revenues. This means that the government’s total security contribution from revenues can easily exceed the Chicago Conference commitment of $500 million.

…Over the past decade and a half, most infrastructure assets built off-budget by donors were gradually transferred to the government. However, sufficient funding has not been allocated through the budget to maintain these assets over time. In 2011 for instance, the cost of maintaining civilian assets in 5 core sectors (education, health, rural development, transport and energy) was estimated at $710 million, and was projected to increase to $1.1 billion by 2014.10 However, budget allocated for O&M in those five sectors in 2011 amounted to only $132 million.

…Social protection spending almost doubled between 2012 and 2014, a period when revenue collection weakened. While Afghanistan still compares well with similar countries with respect to social protection spending (about 2 percent of GDP, combining on and off-budget), the Government provides essentially all its social protection resources to public sector retirees, and martyrs and disabled and their survivors, leaving little room for social assistance schemes targeted to the poor. The existing safety net reaches less than 25 percent of the poor, while about six million Afghans living in poverty are not covered by any formal social protection program.

The only way that Afghanistan can create a substantially higher probability of victory is to combine every major reform in politics, governance, economics, and fighting corruption in the civil sector with adequate aid funding. Given its long history of failure to make real reforms, rather than new sets of plans and promises, U.S. efforts to enforce conditionality in provide such aid -- and efforts to get other donors and international organizations to support such efforts --are not an option, but a necessity.
**Figure 11: World Bank Estimate of Afghan Fiscal Stability Problem**

**Domestic Revenues, 2003-2015**

**Projected On Budget Expenditures, Revenues, and Donor Grants**

Revenues in Afghanistan and select South Asian, Central Asian, Low-Income, and Fragile Countries (2008-12 average, in percent of GDP)

Total Off and On Budget Expenditures, Grants, and Domestic Revenues (% of GDP)

Figure 12: World Bank Estimate of Afghan Civil-Military Spending Strains

Source: World Development Indicators

On-budget expenditures by functional classification (percent of GDP)

Source: World Development Indicators, Bank staff data reports (LDB), IMF’s Government Finance Statistics database, and IMF staff country reports. World Bank Group, SYSTEMATIC COUNTRY DIAGNOSTIC. February 1, 2016, pp. 52-53
VI. The Problem of Pakistan and the U.S. Role in Central Asia

Afghanistan is not the only problem. The “fifth threat” – other nations – must also be dealt with. The U.S. will need to make some clear decisions about Pakistan and its future role in Central Asia.

The history of U.S. strategic relations with Pakistan is a long and troubled one, and cannot be separated from U.S. interests in ending or limiting Pakistan’s long confrontation with India, and in dealing with China’s emergence as the dominant regional power in Asia. Ever since the FSU invasion of Afghanistan and the time of Zia, it has also been a relationship with a deeply divided Pakistan: A country which often seems to have common interest with the U.S., but whose military and intelligence services has support violent Islamist extremist groups, sought to expand Pakistani strategic influence over Pakistan, and have tolerated and supported Al Qa’ida, the Taliban, and Haqqani Network.

The reality is that Pakistan is not an ally, it is nation that effectively sells transit and overflight rights -- and very uncertain restraint in its support of Al Qa’ida, the Taliban, and Haqqani Network – for aid. It is more than willing to endlessly criticize the U.S. for its actions while rarely taking any responsibility for its own. And, it is far from clear that Pakistan will ever take any serious action to aid the creation of an peace process in Afghanistan that it cannot use to increases it own influence in that country.

Without going through the long history involved, the U.S. now needs to impose as much conditionality on Pakistan as possible. There is nothing particularly wrong about keeping up the rhetoric of alliance as long as it is clear that the U.S. links its aid specifically to Pakistani action in limiting its support for the enemies the U.S. is fighting, will carry out UCAV strikes an other measures to deal with key enemy leaders in Pakistan, and will consider broader economic sanction if Pakistan conspicuously fails to act.

Cutting off aid – as some members of Congress proposed in July 2016 – would simply create a crisis. Tying the flow of given parts of aid to critical conditions that Pakistan must meet to obtain that aid is a different story. The U.S. has already done this in the past, and if its demands are reasonable and tied to specific Pakistani actions – they can sometimes work. There also are many Pakistanis that recognize the fact that there is no clear way to separate support of violent extremist groups like Al Qa’ida, the Taliban, and Haqqani Network from the very real threat posed by Pakistani extremist groups. The U.S. needs to make it clear that it is prepared to be an ally if Pakistan is.

One basic change that could increase U.S. leverage is to stop ignoring the realities of Pakistan’s negative actions, and to begin to give them near-total transparency. This can be done through detailed background briefings to the media, by making Pakistan’s actions a key part of the DoD semi-annual report on the Afghan War, by the Congress tasking regular reporting on an independent basis as well as Taking regular audits of how aid is actually used, and by expanding the coverage of Pakistan in the State Department annual country reports on terrorism. The U.S. uses such techniques in many other cases, and denial simply is not working.

More broadly, the U.S. needs to reexamine how best to bring Russia, China, the Central Asian states, and possibly Iran into the effort to support Afghanistan. The U.S. has the luxury in Central Asia of being able to win the new Great Game simply by refusing to play it. It has no major strategic interests in the region, and nothing to win by engaging in more than conventional
diplomacy. Russia, China, the Central Asian states, and Iran have to lay whether they like it or not, and any cooperation between them can never totally ignore the need to compete as well.

The U.S. should examine how it can exert leverage on each outside power if it commits to staying in Afghanistan – a decision which will be to their very real advantage. The U.S. does not have to stay in Afghanistan. Regional powers will have to react if the U.S. does not. Accordingly, the U.S. should also communicate the fact that any “strategic triage” the ends in a decision to stay in Afghanistan will be partly conditional on their actions, and any U.S. withdrawal will leave Russia, China, the Central Asian states, and Iran – as well as Pakistan – with the fully burden of responsibility in the future.
VII. “Conditionality” or Probable Afghan Defeat

There is no reliable way to assess the present level of risk in Afghanistan, the full level of effort necessary to limit it and the strategic trade offs it U.S. interest in providing such support without the kind of zero-based net assessment that fully examines the relative merits of given options. As has been stressed throughout this report, many of the public data are lacking, spun, or politicized. Public reporting is now limited, looks backward at best, and is virtually lacking in measure of effectiveness. There has never been a meaningful integrated plan for U.S. civil-military action. “Whole of government” has been an empty catch phrase that has been “hole in government” in practice.

In broad terms, however, the risks seem high and increasing over time, and even more so on the civil side than the military. There is a clear need to carry out the best possible “zero-based” net assessment, collect the best data available, and examine U.S options in depth.

On the surface, it also seems likely that such an assessment will find that there is a good probability that the war is winnable if:

- The U.S. shifts to a conditions-based military effort that provides limited increases in the train and assist mission and combat forces, sizes its aid effort to Afghan needs, and provides a consistent level of effort tailored to the actual conditions in the war – rather than constantly seeking some way to cut its efforts.
- The Afghan security forces are both properly supported and pushed to deal with key shortfalls and problems in leadership and with corruption.
- Afghanistan carries out a reasonable level of reforms in governance and its economy shaped around the reality it is a nation at war, and works with international organizations and country donor teams as well as its military and the NATO military effort to create a civil-military partnership.
- The U.S. and its allies provide reasonable levels of economic aid tailored to the emerging economic crisis in Afghanistan.
- The U.S. makes both aid and U.S. military support conditional on Afghan willingness to create effective political leadership, reductions in corruption, and real-world economic reform.

The U.S. should, however, examine the options for withdrawal if the Afghan government fails to act. It has no obligation to help a government that does so little to help itself, and Afghanistan is more of a strategic sideshow than a vital strategic interest.

Strategic Triage: A Conditions-Based, Long-term Effort or Leave

There is a clear need for strategic triage. The U.S. does not owe Afghanistan anything if its government proves unwilling to help itself, and its politic paralyze effective action. No U.S. commitment to a limit strategic objective should be open ended, or ignore other – often higher – strategic priorities. But simply seeking to do as little as possible while still seeking an exist is a certain recipe for failure when relatively small increases in the military and civil effort that do not involve major combat forces or massive aid spending might well succeed.

If the U.S. decides to say, it must be on the basis of providing adequate resources over a period of years. Simply buying time, or trying to guess at the critical minimum, will either simply prolongs the process of defeat or eventually force the U.S. into far larger and more costly efforts to try to fix problems that have grown far worse.
President Obama – or his successor – might well be able to get the Congressional and broader public political support they would need 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 still seems to be enough Republican and Democratic support from Congress to make a start in at least the planning and analysis phase. And, even if this has to wait for the next Administration, there should still be time to act before the beginning of the key portions of the campaign season in Afghanistan in 2017.

**The Military Side of Conditionality**

It is may well be unrealistic to expect any major action by the Obama Administration to deal with the military aspects of a conditions based strategy at this point in time. 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. Given the time the Administration has left, its own ideological views, and the partisan character of the coming election, it may simply be too late to see any movement towards a more realistic strategy until the next President takes office.

At the same time, it would be far better to plan and implement the key military elements of such a strategy as soon as possible. Providing U.S. military and civil support to ensure that the Afghan forces can survive and win, and have time and help to become self-sufficient is the key. So far, “creeping incrementalism” has simply slapped the equivalent of Band-Aid on the wounds caused by premature cuts in U.S. support. It also has created a constant pressure to do as little as possible, rather than objectively examine the level of military civil effort that is need to offer a reasonable probability of success over what will inevitably be a long period of time unless that insurgency somehow implodes because of its own internal tensions.

It seems likely that a full review of the kind of military support the U.S. should provide would not go beyond 13,000-15,000 personnel, with a heavy focus on air power and forward deployed train and assist personnel.

Here, the U.S. should examine the need to have forward advisors down to the Kandak level, and in coordinating the role of the Afghan military and Afghan police. A successful advisory role cannot be based on training and force generation. It must be focused on aiding the Afghan order of battle in the field, where the police make up some 40% or more of that order of battle and provide a critical shield for governance, any form of functioning justice system – whether formal or traditional, and aid activity.

The U.S. also should provide a broad enough chain of advisors so they can warn when reinforcements and resupply are not being provided, given commanders cannot lead or will not act, and where police/government abuses alienate the population. One key aspect of the train and assist mission will be to monitor and warn when any key link in operations from the MoD/MoI level to the field fails, is incompetent, or too corrupt for the security effort to work.

As for the combat elements of the U.S. effort, the various elements of the Taliban and other insurgents still seem weak enough so that putting small teams of Special Forces forward, providing on call air support in an emergency, and providing rapid deployment of mixes of small
U.S. combat elements tied to rapid deployment of elite Afghan combat forces when the insurgents do make sudden gains should still amount to “decisive force.”

Another key aspect will be to help the ANSF develop the kind of data reporting and planning systems need to effectively plan and manage the war and do with sufficient transparency to be credible with the Afghan people and the countries that provide military aid and train and assist personnel.

There should, however, be a clear price for both sustaining and increasing the U.S. military effort. “Conditionality” in granting aid is often rejected on the grounds it is not diplomatic or can produce a political backlash in the country involved.

As some portions of the DoD report for July 2016 already indicate, there 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:95

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.

A senior military observer of Afghanistan notes that,

On the militarily side, Resolute Support imposes conditions-based measures on the Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) with the programs funded and supervised by the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A). The principle of conditionality should also be expanded to other factors that influence outcomes in Afghanistan.

Like you, I also emphasize critical civil factors which will have a significant impact on policy success or failure. These factors include the fragility of the economy, demographics, governance, corruption and in particular, the benign effects of narcotics. We also need a viable reconciliation/reintegration effort to eventually resolve the underlying causes of the conflict.

The U.S. should tie military aid and train and assist and combat support to serious Afghan action to improve the MOD and MOI, and making progress in the regular forces and police, and enforce them by delaying aid when they are not met. It should be clear to both senior Afghan officials and commanders that that they will be held personally responsible for such progress and that failures and serious corruption will mean that aid will be halted until they are actually dismissed.

Success does not consist of meeting manpower goals or the numbers trained. It consists of creating effective military and police units with effective leaders that prove themselves in combat and in providing security. As Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann, a former Ambassador in Afghanistan notes,

‘‘...one thing that I believe needs more emphasis is the need for strong military leadership and merit promotions to top military leadership. Without that, many of the other reforms won't accomplish
much. We can tolerate some corruption and some political appointments but we cannot tolerate a gross lack of performance. Again, a really tough problem but one that needs to be highlighted.”

**The Other Civil Side of Conditionality: An Integrated Civil-Military Effort**

The United States should act as quickly as possible to tie future military and economic aid — and any expansion in aid — to specific conditions and timelines for Afghan action in the civil dimension as well. Like the military side, the U.S. should tie and civil aid to clearly defined conditions and timelines for action in reform.

The Afghan government should be held accountable for actually implementing its current reform plans and the key additional steps called for in its own reform plans and do so in close consultation with the World Bank and IMF. These reforms, and limited additional aid, seem likely to offer a practical option for nation building that can be largely driven by the Afghans, can be implemented in wartime at a practical pace, and will be cheaper and more effective than the “transformational” aid efforts of the past.

It also seems likely that a “zero-based” review will find that if Afghanistan moves from talking about reform to actual reform, much can be done the “Afghan way.” The U.S. and other donors will also find the cost of providing enough civil aid for Afghanistan to ride out its current economic problems and move toward development in the future to be both practical and affordable.

Once again, the U.S. should not set impossible standards and timelines, or refuse to accept the reality that some levels of Afghan corruption are inevitable. The U.S. should firmly tie all forms of aid and providing the necessary improvements in the U.S. military presence to actual Afghan economic reform as well as military reform. But, it should use this leverage carefully and in targeted ways designed to produce result where they are most needed and where afghans can understand the focus of U.S. actions.

To again quote Ambassador Neumann,

"Applying conditionality in ways that can realistically be applied in Afghanistan makes complete sense in principle. It is the how that drives me crazy. Leaving if they don't clean up their act seems like threatening suicide if another party doesn't reform. It's not really credible. But finding leverage that works has largely eluded us. This, and the broader mis-governance that it is a part of are the most discouraging part of the mission. I'd love to see us at least go after the tax returns of those senior Afghans who are US citizens. It wouldn't solve the problem but maybe people would begin to believe we were serious.

Relying heavily on Afghan reform plans and international institutions will eliminate much of the need for U.S. planning, provided a basis for international coordination and consensus, and bypass the failures of the UN and UNAMA. Allowing the World Bank and IMF to take the lead in determining what reforms are needed and the pace at which Afghanistan should act will compensate for the lack of clear capability to plan such reforms in the State Department and USAID.

These measures can also shape the necessary use of leverage in controlling the flow of aid 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 than the Afghan people who have suffered from their failures.
The U.S. must, however, prepare to remain the major donor of both military and civil aid, and accept the fact that adequately funding civil aid will be as necessary as military aid. This is critical. The World Bank is all too correct in identifying aid as the third critical constraint on Afghan development:

- **The third constraint is declining aid. Afghanistan is unique worldwide in its extraordinary dependence on foreign aid**, which amounted to 45 percent of GDP in 2013 and is critical to financing growth, service delivery, and security. Furthermore, security expenditures are remarkably high (with on budget and off budget security spending about 25 percent of GDP in 2014), thus reducing fiscal space for much needed civilian operating and development spending. While aid is already down from peak levels, it is projected to be drawn down further in the medium term. This has several implications. First, it means that new sources of growth driven increasingly by the private sector will be important for jobs and growth in the post-transition period. Second, it means that the expansion of service delivery going forward will need to pay increasing attention to targeting and effectiveness. Third, it means that fiscal stability and development progress will require significant efforts to mobilize revenues and prioritize spending going forward.

**Congress Needs to Focus on Substance**

These issues also raise questions about the role of Congress and its “bipartisan” failure to come to grips with the war. So far, the Congress has contributed 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 for June 2016 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 level of integrated civil-military effort, the details of the military 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.

At a minimum, the Congress needs to make three basic changes in its own conduct if it to have a meaningful impact on how the Executive Branch shapes the war:
It needs to require at least semi-annual Interagency reporting that requires an integrated civil military plan, provides a detailed assessment of the trends in the situation, sets clear milestones for the future, and has clearly defined measures of effectiveness.

It needs to redefine the tasking of the Special Inspector General and the Lead Inspector Generals to provide independent reporting on the level of Interagency coordination and planning, and relevance and quality of the measures of effectiveness.

It needs to require reporting on the OCO budget that integrates all federal spending – civil and military – into an integrated civil-military effort, that clearly ties together the efforts of DoD, State, and USAID, and ensures that the budget and spending are well defined enough so that funds cannot be requested or used in ways that are not directly related to the conflict involved.¹⁷

Rhetoric and visibility exercises in public hearings serve member’s interests, but not those of the nation. The Congress needs to focus on the substance of strategy, the real world complexity of the war, and making the future work – not simply make broad judgments and focus on partisan issues and views.

¹ VOA, “On background attributed to a senior administration official,” June 10, 2016 at 12:32:56 PM EDT
² SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, pp. 88-89.
³ A so-called integrated civil-military plan was developed, but consisted largely of PowerPoint goals lacking integrated civil-military goals and milestones. The erratic variation in aid spending by major category are reflected in the graphs in the SIAGAR Quarterly Report of July 30, 2016, pp. 66-77. A detailed review of spending by Department and Agency shows even more erratic spending by program and project type from year to year.
⁴ SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, p. 81.
¹¹ VOA, “On background attributed to a senior administration official,” June 10, 2016 at 12:32:56 PM EDT

14 Quarterly reports of the Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom’s Sentinel for March 31, 2015, pp. 11-25.

15 Quarterly reports of the Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom’s Sentinel for March 31, 2015, pp. 11-25.

16 These comments were written on August 14, 2014. The most recent Lead Inspector Report had still not been issued, over four months after the March 31,2016 report, pp. 25-26.

17 Quarterly reports of the Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom’s Sentinel for March 31, 2015, p. 24.

18 SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, pp. 88-89.


20 Reflective of the historical decrease in violence during the winter, the number of effective enemy-initiated attacks decreased when compared to the previous reporting period. However, as expected given seasonal trends, effective enemy-initiated attacks increased gradually in the weeks preceding and during the start of the traditional spring and summer fighting season. Consistent with the previous reporting period and the overall trend since the end of the U.S. and NATO combat missions and the transition to the RS mission, very few effective enemy-initiated attacks involved coalition or U.S. forces.

The coalition relies largely on ANDSF reporting for all metrics, including effective enemy-initiated attacks, which are a subset of all security incidents.27 Although the data collected and compiled by the ANDSF is still considered useful and is consistent with UN reporting and other sources, coalition analysts continue to refine metrics to assess the security situation accurately.

Reports on security incidents and effective enemy-initiated attacks are often delayed by several weeks due to translation and long reporting timelines through the ANDSF chain of command. In addition, ANDSF units frequently do not report insurgent attacks that do not result in casualties such as indirect fire or attempted IED explosions that do not wound or kill ANDSF personnel.

Security incidents comprise all enemy action including enemy-initiated direct fire and indirect fire, such as mortar, rocket, and artillery; surface-to-air-fire (SAFIRE) and explosive hazard events including executed attacks (IED explosion, mine strike); and potential or attempted attacks (IEDs or mines found and cleared, premature IED detonations, and IED turn-ins). Security incidents do not include friendly action, e.g., direct fire and indirect fire that are initiated by friendly forces. Due to this change in reporting since the ISAF mission, the number of effective enemy-initiated attacks is the most representative metric of overall security conditions rather than the total number of reported security incidents. This change in reporting metrics for security trends is indicative of the challenges associated with the coalition’s increasing reliance on the ANDSF for nearly all types of reporting data.


22 SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, pp. 85-86.


SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, pp. 90-106.

SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, p. 94.

SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, pp. 94-96.


SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, pp. 93.

SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, p. 100.


57 For example, see SIGAR, Quarterly Report, July 30, 2016, [https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/](https://www.sigar.mil/quarterlyreports/), pp. 65-78.


63 Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), Quarterly Report to Congress, April 2016, p. 89


69 These issues are explored in more depth in a separate Burke Chair study: Afghanistan: The Failing Economics of Transition, https://www.csis.org/analysis/afghanistan-failing-economics-transition.


One outside expert comments that, tax policies have been ‘strengthened,’ but many businesses are complaining that they are too high and some industries are getting squeezed to the point of shutting off further investments. There’s a tax critical mass that the government must be aware of. Customs collection efforts are becoming more uniform and computerized to remove opportunities for corruption. USAID says it’s been very successful so far and they are rolling out eCustoms initiatives across the country.

Views differ. One expert comments that, “asset declaration is of marginal value in my opinion, and implementing and strengthening the AML/CFT framework has been very slow. It’s been difficult to get the U.S. Treasury (the lead U.S. agency for FATF) to provide any meaningful information about Afghanistan’s remaining AML/CFT vulnerabilities or pace of reforms.”


The issues here are not minor. The DoD submission buries a wide range of extraneous spending in the OCO budget request for Afghanistan and the State and USAID OCO efforts consist of disconnected individual efforts whose budget justification can charitably be described as incoherent. See Anthony H. Cordesman, Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO) and the Uncertain Cost of U.S. Wars, CSIS, May 10, 2016, https://www.csis.org/analysis/overseas-contingency-operations-oco-and-uncertain-cost-us-wars.

An GAO study of the overall OCO account also found in August 2016, that, “GAO found that DOD used its authorities to realign about $146.9 billion of its funding from fiscal years 2009 through 2015 (that is, moving funds through transfers from one account to another, and reprogrammings within an account). During GAO’s review, the effects of such realignments on base obligations were not readily apparent because DOD did not report its O&M obligations separately for each account in its report accompanying a bill for DOD’s fiscal year 2015 appropriations that it does not have a clear understanding of OCO funding used to support DOD’s day programs and activities. The services track O&M obligations and OCO appropriations for OCO reporting purposes, but DOD’s financial management regulations do not require it to congressionally report O&M base obligations separately for each account in its budget justification materials and execution reports. By revising its guidance to require congressional reporting on O&M base obligations for each account in these materials and reports, DOD could provide complete information to assist Congress in better understanding and overseeing DOD’s full funding needs for O&M base.” See GAO-16-537, Defense Budget: DOD Needs to Improve Reporting of Operation and Maintenance Base Obligations, www.gao.gov/assets/680/679081.pdf, Government Accountability Office, Aug 16, 2016.