



**Statement of  
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On Risks to Stability in Afghanistan: Politics, Security, and International Commitment  
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Chairman McKeon, Ranking Member Smith, Distinguished Members of the House Armed Services Committee,

It is an honor to be invited to testify before this Committee about risks to stability in Afghanistan. It is a particular privilege to appear with my three fellow panelists – Dr. Cordesman, Ambassador Neumann, and Dr. O’Hanlon – all of whom I have spent time with in Afghanistan, and all of whom have sharpened my own thinking about these important issues.

I appear here today in my capacity as an analyst with the Congressional Research Service. But my testimony also draws on my experience serving as an advisor to a number of our military commanders in Afghanistan as part of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and also on extended visits as an outside expert, most recently late this spring.

Today’s discussion is timely. In May, President Obama announced plans for U.S. military engagement in Afghanistan after 2014. Pending the signing of a U.S.-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), establishing the terms of reference for future U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan, some U.S. troops are to serve under U.S. command and others are to serve as part of NATO’s follow-on mission, Resolute Support. By the end of 2014, U.S. troop levels are to be reduced to 9,800; by the end of 2015, they are to be drawn down further to 5,500 troops consolidated in Kabul and at Bagram Airfield; and by the end of 2016, the U.S. military presence is to be reduced to an Office of Security Cooperation at the U.S. Embassy. In addition, as of 2015, the focus of the effort is to shift to “two narrow missions” – “training Afghan forces and supporting counterterrorism operations against the remnants of al Qaeda.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See President Barack Obama, Statement by the President on Afghanistan, Washington, DC, May 27, 2014, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/05/27/statement-president-afghanistan>. Current U.S. force presence in Afghanistan is legally based on a bilateral exchange of diplomatic notes in 2002 and 2003. While those notes specified no timelines, both states have committed themselves publicly to basing any post-2014 U.S. troop presence on a new agreement. See Embassy of the United States of America, Diplomatic Note, September 26, 2002; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan, Note, May 28, 2003.

Despite the relative clarity of those specific decisions, and the broad commitments articulated in the 2012 U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA),<sup>2</sup> the way ahead for Afghanistan itself, and for U.S. engagement there, remains uncertain. Transition of full responsibility for security to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) is underway but incomplete, and the ANSF still face significant challenges. Afghanistan's political path remains mired in a highly contested electoral process that may or may not produce a viable new political leadership accepted by the Afghan people. Afghanistan's relations with its neighbor Pakistan remain contentious and non-conducive to stability. And Afghanistan's future economic viability remains indeterminate at best. Further U.S. decision-making in these arenas – or the lack thereof – is likely to have a marked impact on the prospects for future stability in Afghanistan.

## Strategy

For the U.S. Government, fundamental components of strategy-making for Afghanistan include:

- U.S. national security interests in Afghanistan and the region;
- the minimum essential conditions – political, economic, security – that would need to pertain in Afghanistan and the region in order to protect U.S. interests over the long run;
- current and projected U.S. approaches, including how they intersect with efforts by other Allies and partners, for helping Afghans establish those conditions;
- the timeline by which, and extent to which, Afghans are likely to be able to sustain those conditions with relatively limited support from the international community;
- risks to U.S. national security interests if Afghans are unable to do so; and
- the importance of this overall effort – given its likely timeline, risks, and costs – compared to other U.S. priorities.

## U.S. Interests

U.S. interests are by definition a matter of judgment, not fact. U.S. national security concerns in Afghanistan and the region might include the spread of violent extremism, nuclear proliferation from Pakistan, and nuclear confrontation between Pakistan and India. A stable Afghanistan might help quell these concerns by making sanctuary less available to violent extremists; by encouraging state stability in Pakistan by lowering the temperature between Pakistan and Afghanistan; and by making Afghanistan less available as a space for proxy contestation between Pakistan and India.

By most measures, these concerns are serious ones. At issue is how highly they ought to be prioritized, given limited resources, compared with competing national security concerns and domestic exigencies.

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<sup>2</sup> Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2, 2012.

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## U.S. Strategy in Practice

The Obama Administration has reasonably consistently articulated two “core goals” for the war – to defeat al Qaeda and to prevent future safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan – but with some significant modification over time.<sup>3</sup> The goal of defeating al Qaeda became, in President Obama’s 2013 State of the Union address, “defeating *the core of* al Qaeda,” a new and apparently narrower formulation.<sup>4</sup>

In turn, the goal of preventing future safe havens in the region has long been open to interpretation concerning what exactly such prevention would require. Over time, observers and practitioners have proposed various ideas including strong Afghan security forces; a firm economic and governance foundation; a formal political settlement to the conflict; and/or full cooperation from neighboring states. Yet as a rule, U.S. efforts have not been supported by universal internal agreement about what the minimum essential conditions for preventing future safe havens ought to be.

In practice, U.S. efforts on the ground in Afghanistan have included a military campaign, in conjunction with Afghan and international counterparts; support to an Afghan political reconciliation process designed to bring the war to a close; development assistance designed to create some economic opportunity; encouragement of a more constructive Afghan-Pakistani relationship; and at least tacit support for a constitutionally-based Afghan political process. What many observers wonder is how coherently all these facets of U.S. engagement in Afghanistan fit together as part of a single strategy aimed at bringing the war to an acceptable conclusion that protects U.S. interests over the longer term.

## State of the Campaign

Overall evaluations of the state of the campaign in Afghanistan vary widely, not least because looking across Afghanistan, it is easy to find sterling examples of both tremendous success and abject failure.

The basic campaign logic dates back to 2009, when General Stanley McChrystal took command of NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and was tasked to conduct an initial strategic assessment.<sup>5</sup> That assessment, and the subsequent ISAF campaign design it informed, were based on the Obama Administration’s two core goals as well as on the novel prospect of

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<sup>3</sup> See for example President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on a New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Washington, DC, March 27, 2009, available at [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-on-a-New-Strategy-for-Afghanistan-and-Pakistan/); and President Obama, Remarks, May 1, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> See President Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President in the State of the Union Address,” Washington, DC, February 12, 2013, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>, emphasis added. President Obama’s May 2014 Afghanistan policy speech did not mention “goals”.

<sup>5</sup> The war in Afghanistan began in late 2001 with a U.S.-led coalition military operation designed to remove Afghanistan’s Taliban-led regime and to prevent future terrorist safe havens, in the wake of the terrorist attacks launched by al Qaeda from Afghanistan on September 11, 2001. Today, most U.S. forces in Afghanistan serve in the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), while some others, including some Special Operations Forces, serve under direct U.S. command. The U.S. four-star commander in Afghanistan has dual-hatted responsibility for U.S. efforts and the NATO mission.

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more troops, more civilian expertise, more resources, more high-level leadership attention, and relatively unlimited time.<sup>6</sup>

Over time, the campaign has been both updated and constrained. One major addition was the introduction of the formal “Transition” process, in which responsibility for security has been shifted, in discrete stages, from coalition to Afghan forces. Afghans formally assumed lead responsibility for security on June 18, 2013, a marker known as Milestone 2013; and they are scheduled to formally assume full responsibility by December 31, 2014.<sup>7</sup>

One major set of constraints on the campaign, in turn, has been the announcement, and then execution, of successive U.S. troop drawdowns. In December 2009, in a speech at West Point announcing the U.S. troop surge, President Obama also announced that those surge troops would begin to draw down in July 2011. In a June 2011 speech, President Obama announced plans for the drawdown of those surge forces: by 10,000 troops by the end of 2011, and by a further 23,000 by the end of September 2012, declining to a total of 68,000 by that date. And in February 2013, President Obama announced that the U.S. troop commitment in Afghanistan would draw down by 34,000 more troops by February 2014, leaving approximately 33,000 troops in Afghanistan.<sup>8</sup> Broadly, all of these drawdown targets were met.

Against the backdrop of those significant adjustments, the campaign has focused throughout on building up the ANSF while working with the ANSF to reduce the scale of the insurgent threat to proportions that Afghan forces could manage in the future with very limited support from the international community. The campaign has also included U.S. efforts to maintain direct pressure on al Qaeda and affiliates.

Many observers contend that if the campaign were not working, it should be discontinued immediately – not gradually – given its high cost in terms of lives and resources. But by most Afghan and coalition accounts, the basic logic of the campaign on the ground has proven to be sound, based on the overall improvement of Afghan forces, degradation of the insurgency, and adaptation by coalition forces.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, August 30, 2009, available in redacted form from the Washington Post, at [http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment\\_Redacted\\_092109.pdf](http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf). The author was part of the McChrystal Assessment team.

<sup>7</sup> These steps follow joint Afghan-NATO decisions that were affirmed by the 2010 NATO Summit in Lisbon, and the 2012 NATO Summit in Chicago. See NATO Lisbon Summit Declaration, Lisbon, Portugal, November 20, 2010, available at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_68828.htm?mode=pressrelease](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm?mode=pressrelease); and Chicago Summit Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Chicago, May 20, 2012, available at [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official\\_texts\\_87593.htm?mode=pressrelease](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87593.htm?mode=pressrelease).

<sup>8</sup> See President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on the Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan, West Point, NY, December 1, 2009, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-address-nation-way-forward-afghanistan-and-pakistan>; President Barack Obama, Remarks by the President on the Way Forward in Afghanistan, Washington, DC, June 22, 2011, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/06/22/remarks-president-way-forward-afghanistan>; President Obama, State of the Union, 2013, see <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/02/12/remarks-president-state-union-address>.

<sup>9</sup> Interviews with U.S., other coalition, and Afghan officials, 2009-2014.

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## Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF)

U.S strategic thinking has consistently assigned a considerable future role to the ANSF in providing security in Afghanistan and thus helping to protect U.S. interests.

### *ANSF Progress*

By almost any standard, the progress of the ANSF, over a relatively short span of time, has been remarkable in some respects. It was only five years ago that Afghan force generation began in earnest. Since that time, the ANSF have increased significantly in capacity; grown markedly in capabilities, from basic “move, shoot, and communicate” skills toward combined arms; and deepened their confidence in their own abilities, as evidenced by the ways that Afghan commanders describe their recent and future operations. In turn, according to both ISAF and Afghan officials, that overall growth in ANSF competence is increasingly manifested in effects on the enemy.<sup>10</sup>

Also striking, particularly in the last couple years, is the extent of integration among various Afghan military and police forces at the tactical level. Five years ago, it was not uncommon for units of different forces to get into firefights with each other. More recently, while the Army and police still may not trust each other, combined Army/police planning and operating has become the norm, further catalyzed by the imperative to work together to provide security for the elections earlier this year. Weekly or bi-weekly provincial-level security meetings (or “shuras”) also seem to have had a powerful catalytic effect on Afghan unity of effort. Increasingly common across the country, they bring together, under the chairmanship of the Provincial Governor, the leaders of the various Afghan forces operating in a province to agree on the security challenges they face and how best to meet them.<sup>11</sup>

### *ANSF Challenges*

Most coalition and Afghan commanders contend that the ANSF are far from “done” – that further gains are required, and that gains to date are not yet sustainable.<sup>12</sup>

In general, ANSF progress is uneven, in part the result of choices made by the coalition about where and how to concentrate effort, in the face of scarce resources. As a rule, the ANA remains more capable and more responsible than the Afghan police. The Afghan Border Police (ABP) in particular – long the “economy-of-force force” for the coalition – benefitted least from unit partnering and lags well behind other Afghan forces in development. Some ABP commanders describe feeling abandoned and overlooked, at their remote locations, with little support from the ANA or even top cover from their own Ministry of Interior-led chain of command. Coalition and

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<sup>10</sup> Interviews with Afghan and coalition officials, 2012, 2013, 2014. That new Afghan confidence was also, in part, the product of necessity. The drawdown of 33,000 U.S. troops in 2012, to “pre-surge” levels, and the very visible coalition base consolidations and closures that accompanied it, galvanized the conviction of Afghan security leaders at all levels that coalition forces were, indeed, going home, and led many to take on greater responsibility. Many ANSF commanders have described taking on missions they were initially not sure they could handle, then being convinced by their success to take on even more.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with Afghan Provincial Governors, ANSF officials, coalition officials, 2013, 2014.

<sup>12</sup> Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2014.

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other ANSF officials simply seem to assume that the default for those ABP posted out along Afghanistan's borders is to readily accept bribes, and to cut deals with insurgents and criminals.<sup>13</sup>

In turn, unity of effort is a work in progress. Coalition forces sometimes describe ANSF "layered security" as a neat, orderly, and consistent distribution of roles and responsibilities among Afghan forces, glued together in close collaboration. In practice, the patterns of ANSF cooperation vary greatly from place to place, depending in part on the security challenges and the developmental state of each Afghan force, in each area. The roles of particular forces may also be driven by bold, persuasive personalities – strong, nationally-inclined Commanders of some Afghan National Army (ANA) Corps or cult-of-personality police chiefs. Most observers suggest that ultimately, the ANSF will need a systematized division of labor, in order to size and resource the total force efficiently and effectively. Yet for the near-term, many suggest, it may be sufficient that Afghan security leaders in any given place share a vision of what security should look like there, and of who should do what to provide it.<sup>14</sup>

Also still a work in progress is ANSF reliance on their own organic enablers – capabilities used in support of combat. Most observers agree that Afghan forces will do things differently, and with different tools, than coalition forces have done, and that Afghan forces may simply decide not to do some things altogether. Yet the ANSF must have sufficient, workable tools in place in order to maintain their confidence and to support effective operations.

In the intelligence arena, for example, Afghan reliance on their own organic enablers means less access to the scope and scale of signals intelligence (SIGINT) than Afghans have seen coalition forces employ. But it also means access to much more finely-tuned human intelligence (HUMINT) due to their far closer cultural ties with local populations. While the ANSF may not be able to pinpoint insurgent presence in a particular compound, they can typically identify the relevant village, and then use door-to-door techniques to narrow their search.

Some observers and practitioners suggest that these changes in the mix of intel the ANSF rely on are reducing the impact the ANSF is having against the enemy. Others suggest, even more fundamentally, that as their engagement with coalition advisors diminishes, the ANSF are less inclined altogether to conduct genuinely intel-driven operations – that is, basing their operations squarely on the understandings provided by intelligence, rather than simply "leaping into the back of a pick-up truck and going off to fight."<sup>15</sup>

Of even more concern to Afghan and coalition commanders is the enabler arena of "air." The Afghan Air Force (AAF) is not expected to be fully fielded and mission-capable for several more years, and even when it is, both its capacity and its capabilities will be relatively limited. Air is a critical component of the ability to conduct casualty evacuation (CASEVAC) – essential for saving lives, preserving morale, and protecting future recruitment. The development timeline and capacity limitations of the AAF make the prospect of a CASEVAC system that relies wholly on air assets unrealistic. By early 2014, some ANA Corps Commanders had made great strides compared to one year earlier, and were able to conduct the vast majority of their own CASEVAC through a combination of air and ground. Doing so requires a system that includes functioning

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<sup>13</sup> Interviews with ANSF and coalition officials, 2012, 2013, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Interviews with ANSF officials, Afghan civilian officials, and ISAF officials, 2012, 2013, 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Interviews with ISAF officials, 2013, 2014.

ground and air transportation; finely honed point-of-injury skills; and available trauma care, whether military or civilian. However, in areas with limited air and limited trauma care, the ANSF cannot yet solve this problem themselves.<sup>16</sup>

Air is also a critical component of fires – the use of weapons and other systems to create a specific lethal or nonlethal effect on a target. To date, the ANSF have relied significantly on coalition close air support (CAS) and close combat attack (CCA) – from fixed-wing and rotary-wing, respectively – and the ANSF is eager to have their own fires capability. The most realistic solution to the ANSF requirement to be able to deliver fires is some combination of air-based and ground-based systems. In many locations the ANA has indeed made significant progress integrating and employing D-30 Howitzers and mortars.<sup>17</sup> But in 2014, a top requirement named by several ANA Corps Commanders was for rotary-wing gunships, a capability they will not be able to provide for themselves for a long time.

## U.S. and Other Coalition Forces

No less important an aspect of the status of the campaign than the ANSF is the role – and effectiveness – of U.S. and other coalition forces, who have frequently been called on to adjust their thinking and focus. In theory, if coalition forces are not able to adapt to new and significantly different roles, then no NATO post-2014 advisory mission should be contemplated.

In practice, coalition adaptation over time, while uneven, has often been both rapid and effective – depending in part on the abilities of each commander, on the sophistication of the vocabulary in use in theater, and on communications practices among commanders, at any given time.<sup>18</sup> Just a few years ago, coalition forces fought largely unilaterally, dragging along with them a handful or two of Afghan forces when available. Then the coalition troop surge, and Afghan force generation, allowed full, *shona ba shona* (“shoulder to shoulder”) unit-partnering – coalition and Afghan units living, planning, and executing together, 24/7. But partnering was never an end in itself, and when Afghan capabilities permitted, coalition forces generally began stepping back and shifting into unequal partnerships in which Afghan forces increasingly played leading roles. For at least a year or more, coalition forces have been refocusing on tailored advisory roles: mentoring Afghan leaders and commanders at all levels, strengthening headquarters staffs, encouraging Afghan unity of effort, and providing some enablers when truly needed.

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<sup>16</sup> Last year, Afghan and ISAF officials illustrated the challenge of making sure enabler bridges are in place, with a cautionary tale from Jagatu, Wardak province just south of Kabul. There, some Afghan police took enemy fire, and one was wounded. The police reached up their own chain of command to make a request to the Ministry of Defense (MoD) for rotary wing CASEVAC support. The MoD was unable to provide assets right away, and as the day progressed, it ran into the obstacle that most Afghan Mi-17 helicopters do not fly at night. Meanwhile, a request for support was passed to ISAF. But ISAF had no forces anywhere nearby on the ground, and could not send helicopters into the apparent middle of nowhere; so ISAF declined to support. The wounded Afghan police officer bled out and died. Some of the Afghan police were reportedly furious...not with ISAF, but with their own system. The story highlighted the need for realistic but sufficient bridges from coalition to Afghan enablers that protect the Afghan force and help it maintain its confidence.

<sup>17</sup> ISAF, and even Afghan, commanders report that “clearing fires,” that is, first making sure that nothing is in the way, remains more of a challenge. Interviews with ISAF and Afghan commanders, 2013 and 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Interviews and participant observation with U.S. and ISAF officials, 2012, 2013, 2014. Some observers point out that just as coalition troop drawdowns, and in particular the 2012 surge recovery, catalyzed greater ANSF confidence, those drawdowns also prompted coalition force adaptation, since lower troop numbers and footprint consolidation made it impossible to continue doing business in the same way.

To be clear, a broad shift to a supporting role has not yet meant disengagement. In the first half of 2014, U.S. and other coalition forces still played some tailored supporting roles at the tactical level, if less robustly than in the past. That engagement included, for example, directly providing some key enablers for particularly tough fights – especially air fires. It included continued “partnering”, in the sense of participating in some operations, by U.S. Special Forces with Afghan commandos. And it included helping trouble-shoot Afghan “unity of effort” in more serious disputes.<sup>19</sup> These activities have generally been compatible with – indeed, supportive of – growing coalition efforts to help Afghans make their security architecture sustainable.

## Insurgency

For many observers, the state of the insurgency is a critical factor in gauging campaign progress to date. Changes in the insurgency tend to be neither linear over time, nor evenly distributed geographically. Insurgent activity tends to follow a cyclical pattern: an annual fighting season, which runs roughly from the end of the poppy harvest in the spring until the weather turns cold in the fall, followed by a lull in activity during the winter typically used for rest and recuperation. Geographically, insurgent activities have been concentrated, though not exclusively, in the largely Pashtun-populated eastern and southern areas of Afghanistan, which offer easy access across the border to safe havens in Pakistan, and on the approaches to Kabul.

By most accounts, including their own, by a year ago or more, insurgent networks had been degraded and their costs of doing business inside Afghanistan had risen substantially. Some insurgents, for example, had been forced to use longer and more treacherous transit routes, and it had grown more expensive for them to pay lower-level fighters. In addition, the insurgency had been pushed back from population centers and commerce routes – the long-standing geographical focus of the campaign. Further, by many accounts, the insurgency as a whole had grown increasingly fractured – divided politically in its views regarding political settlement efforts, and divided operationally regarding targeting.<sup>20</sup> Over the past year, as coalition forces drew down, the ANSF largely held steady against the insurgency, including preventing the disruption of major events such as the November 2013 Loya Jirga, and the two rounds of elections held in April and June 2014.

But as of mid-2014, the insurgency has certainly not been defeated – insurgents remain capable of staging dramatic attacks designed for impact, such as the recent suicide attacks in Kabul, and

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<sup>19</sup> An incident that took place earlier this year, at an Afghan Border Police (ABP) border post in Chergotai, in Khowst province, along the border with Pakistan, helps illustrate. Only 20 of the required 40 ABP were present for duty. They got attacked...and they ran away. At some point as they fled, they called for help from an ANA check point located not too far away, but the ANA took their own sweet time in responding. That meant there were two problems for the Afghan system to solve. The Afghan Ministry of Interior solved its internal problem by relieving the ABP kandak (battalion) and tolay (company) commander responsible for that border post. But to help restore unity of effort among Afghan forces, the second problem, coalition commanders brought together the relevant ANA Corps Commander and ABP Zone Commander and took them to visit Chergotai to forge a shared solution with their teams on the ground. Interviews with ISAF and ANSF officials, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> For example, some insurgent leaders might view targeting international organizations as the priority because it might draw more support from the insurgency’s international “donors,” while other insurgent leaders might view targeting local Afghan security forces as the priority because such forces most directly challenge the insurgency’s influence and ability to operate. Interviews with ISAF and Afghan officials, 2013, 2014.



of mounting some larger-scale assaults, including the recent insurgent activity in Helmand province. The insurgency also continues to enjoy the ability to recruit, and the luxury of safe havens in Pakistan. As coalition forces have drawn down, the insurgency has increasingly targeted those Afghans who might pose the greatest existential threat to insurgent success: the Afghan Local Police (ALP); the ground-up, local anti-Taliban movements born of frustration with Taliban intimidation; and Afghan civilian officials at the national, provincial, and local levels. At issue is to what extent the insurgency may be further emboldened by the ongoing coalition force drawdown, and how well the ANSF will be able to withstand any increases in insurgent pressure.

## Risks to Stability

Most observers agree that no matter how remarkable campaign progress to date may be, the longer-term sustainability of any security gains it has generated will depend on key facets of the broader strategic landscape. Given current conditions and stated policy, stability in Afghanistan faces significant risks in at least four arenas: security, governance, Pakistan, and economics. At issue is what it would take in each of these arenas, at a minimum, to protect security gains and make them sustainable, and what exactly the consequences might be of any risks that Afghans, the United States, and other major stakeholders choose to assume.

### Security

Security in Afghanistan is still by any measure fragile, and it is at risk in at least three significant ways.

First, the ANSF still face critical enabler gaps including CASEVAC, air fires, and intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR). Current planning suggests that after 2014, the international community will no longer use such enablers to support the ANSF. For their part, the ANSF need more time to fully integrate and employ their own enablers, and even then their capacity and capabilities will be quite limited.

Risks, in the face of such gaps, include that the ANSF may choose to limit their reach because they do not have confidence in their ability to take or hold ground; or that the ANSF may cut local-level deals with insurgents. Or – quite differently – the ANSF may over-reach, beyond their capabilities, and suffer setbacks that shake their confidence in their ability to provide security, or the confidence of the Afghan people in them. Mitigating the risks posed by such enabler gaps might include extending the ability of coalition forces to use their own enablers to support the ANSF beyond 2014; or further expediting the integration of enablers by the ANSF.

Second, the ANSF, despite sometimes marked progress at the tactical level, still suffer from institutional weaknesses. They lack effective top-to-bottom systems able to respond sufficiently to requirements in arenas ranging from logistics, to intelligence, to personnel among others.

The risk, if insufficient progress is made in establishing workable systems, is that Afghan Army and police commanders on the ground may grow fatally frustrated by the system's failure to pay salaries in a timely way, or by its inability to provide spare parts, or by its foot-dragging in promoting or removing personnel. That frustration, already manifestly present, has been

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tempered to date by interventions from the coalition, and by a general Afghan hope that their system will improve over time. If Afghan commanders' expectations for future improvement diminish, they might simply decide that the fight is not worth it. In turn, if Afghan soldiers and police do not receive their salaries in a timely way, or if they feel that their system is not taking care of them, then they are not likely to continue to be willing to serve, and their brothers and cousins are not likely to sign up to replace them.

To mitigate these systemic risks, ISAF is increasingly focusing its advisory efforts on “functionally-based security force assistance” – the vertical integration of Afghan systems, ensuring that national-level institutions are responsive to operational- and tactical-level requirements in a timely fashion.<sup>21</sup> The coalition role is helping Afghans make their own systems work, through “end-to-end” advisory support – in Kabul with Ministries and national-level commands, and on the ground with Corps and Zone Commanders and their headquarters. This so-called “regional approach” is the premise for the start of NATO’s Resolute Support effort. If coalition advisory efforts were based exclusively in Kabul, that would leave advisors operating blind – without direct visibility on the systems, at both the user and the provider ends, that they are helping Afghans shape.

At issue is how much advisory support from coalition forces will be required to help Afghans make their own systems work, and how long that might take. Current U.S. policy establishes an *a priori* deadline: an end to the regional approach by the end of 2015. But some practitioners and observers suggest it would be worth taking another conditions-based look after the 2015 fighting season, before final decisions are made.

Third and finally, the overall U.S. effort in Afghanistan and the region also includes an explicit counter-terrorism (CT) component directly targeting al Qaeda and affiliates, reportedly conducted not only by DoD but also by other U.S. Government agencies. President Obama recently summarized the impact of these efforts: “We have struck significant blows against al Qaeda’s leadership, we have eliminated Osama bin Laden, and we have prevented Afghanistan from being used to launch attacks against our homeland.”<sup>22</sup> Most observers would agree with these claims, and also with the view that these extremists continue to pose some threat to the United States. But there is less agreement about the nature and future trajectory of that threat – whether al Qaeda and affiliates will be able to continue to recruit and regenerate; and whether they will continue to favor South Asia as a safe haven when paths of less resistance may be available in other regions of the world.

Looking ahead, experts generally agree that U.S. troop drawdowns, shrinking footprint, and reductions in assets including ISR in Afghanistan, will significantly limit U.S. ability to prosecute the CT fight in the region directly, potentially introducing the risk of a continued, or even enhanced, terrorist threat to the U.S. or its Allies and partners.

The debates about possible risk mitigation sometimes seem to be at cross purposes. Some stress that the best possible mitigation would be eliminating the terrorist presence in the region completely, on our watch, beyond hope of regeneration. Others, perhaps deeming elimination a bridge too far, or believing that regeneration is likely in any case, stress the need to retain

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<sup>21</sup> Interviews with ISAF officials, 2014.

<sup>22</sup> President Obama, Statement, May 27, 2014.

indefinitely a U.S. ability to directly target terrorists in the region. Others, stressing that the more of the CT fight that Afghan and Pakistani forces can handle, the less the U.S. might need to do, and also recognizing that there are few indications yet that regional forces can handle the fight, argue for bolstering Afghan and Pakistani capabilities and political will. These three ways of looking at the problem are not necessarily mutually incompatible, but unless reconciled, they tend to lead to different policy prescriptions.

## Governance

Many Afghans and outside observers suggest that sustaining security gains in Afghanistan requires an architecture of responsive governance to direct the ANSF and hold them accountable; to provide access to justice and the rule of law; to ensure some minimum foundation of economic viability and opportunity; to inspire the trust of regional neighbors; and to earn at least the tacit confidence of the Afghan people. Yet the practice of governance in Afghanistan is more accurately characterized as personalized rule: not everyone loses, and indeed many benefit, but the exercise of governance, in general, is neither predictable nor based on the rule of law. One fundamental challenge to the practice of responsible governance in Afghanistan is simply capacity. Afghan officials and international practitioners generally agree that Afghanistan's highly centralized system of budgeting, decision-making and distribution functions in fits and starts. In practice, some of Afghanistan's 34 provinces have become expert in shaking resources loose from Kabul – through what amounts to lobbying with Kabul-based ministries, based on personal relationships. Yet such lobbying is not always effective, even when the case is urgent.<sup>23</sup>

Another even more pernicious challenge to responsive governance is corruption, not only in the sense of individual rent-seeking behaviors, but more broadly in the sense of the pervasive, voracious contestation for political and economic power and influence, sometimes backed by personalized militias, which consistently cannibalizes the formal Afghan state. Major players within the formal system – from Provincial Governors including Atta Mohammad Noor of Balkh, to Police Chiefs Matiullah Khan of Uruzgan and Abdul Raziq of Kandahar – draw on that system to distribute patronage.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Panjwayi district, a key approach to Kandahar city, a focal point of the campaign, was long an insurgent sanctuary. In early 2013, elders in Zangabad, Panjwayi – emboldened in part by the appointment of a new District Chief of Police (DCoP) originally from their own area, whom they trusted enough to ask for help – decided to stand up to persistent Taliban intimidation. The DCoP helped rally a broader ANSF response, including the recruitment of many more Afghan local police (ALP). In the wake of the uprising, Kandahar Provincial Governor Toryalai Wesa visited Panjwayi, called for greater access to schools and clinics to help solidify the security gains, and pledged to seek support from the relevant ministries in Kabul. While Kandaharis themselves were able to build or repair a number of schools and clinics, Kabul was slow to provide operations and maintenance funds, or personnel to staff the facilities. So as part of the solution, ANA soldiers were assigned to teach school in Panjwayi – a creative solution but not a sustainable one. Interviews with ISAF, Afghan civilian, and ANSF officials, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> For example, northern Helmand province in southern Afghanistan features multiple tribes striving for ascendancy, untold potential poppy profits at stake, the deeply vested interests of the Akundzada family with its close ties to the Presidential Palace in Kabul and its former political leadership roles in the province, the use of district-level governorships and police chief posts as pawns in the power struggle at the expense of local order, and a Taliban all too eager to take advantage of any local-level political vacuums. In 2013, relatively new Helmand Provincial Governor Naeem Baluch was eager to broker a big-tent solution in northern Helmand if only President Karzai would give him significantly expanded gubernatorial authorities – effectively an extra-systemic solution. As one coalition commander, and probably more than one, has wryly but somewhat heart-breakingly observed, “It’s Helmand—it will always be corrupt!” Interviews with ISAF, Afghan civilian, and ANSF officials, 2012, 2013, 2014.

Some observers argue that this multi-faceted struggle for power is simply the Afghan way of doing business, and that one of the best prospects for stability would be a series of local-level deals in which local power-brokers divvy up pieces of the pie, to their mutual satisfaction. The problem with that argument, others assert, is that local-level deals hold only as long as all stakeholders are satisfied with their share of the pie – one failed poppy harvest, or one surge of personal ambition, destabilizes the accord.

The international community has struggled for years with the tension between Afghanistan's need for some reasonable foundation of governance, and the inherent challenges of helping construct such a foundation as outsiders. One of the main conclusions of the 2009 McChrystal Assessment was that governance needed to be on par with security as a focus of the campaign, in order for the campaign to succeed. The basic theory was that the primary arbiter of lasting stability in Afghanistan is the Afghan people – the extent to which they accept the system and are able to hold it accountable. But subsequent efforts by the international community were distinctly uneven in both intent and effects. They included attempts to ensure that each district-level government filled its *tashkil* (personnel roster); to create positive and negative incentive structures to shape the activities of key powerbrokers; to build capacity in key ministries, all too often by doing the work directly; and to nudge the Afghan system into replacing local officials deemed by local residents to be truly up to no good.

Meanwhile, many influential Afghans have pointed to a potentially powerful remedy to help correct perceived power imbalances and the lack of accountability – the growing, and increasingly organized and powerful, voices of Afghan civil society organizations, women's groups, media outlets, private sector pioneers, religious authorities, and traditional local councils. Many Afghans suggest that these voices have great potential to help hold governance in check – if they are given time to develop. Some caution that Afghanistan's civil society is fragile, and that some of its components are dependent on Western funding and support. But many Afghans suggest that while some support from the international community would be welcome – including technical and advisory support, and continued guarantees of basic security – it is Afghans who would do, indeed are doing, the lion's share of the work.<sup>25</sup>

Against that backdrop, many Afghans as well as outside observers regard the 2014 Afghan presidential elections as an opportunity to introduce constructive changes into Afghan governance. By any measure, successful and timely resolution of the contested presidential election results, and general acceptance by Afghans of the outcome – two points that are not yet givens – would seem to be prerequisites for future stability. As necessary as they are, however, they are unlikely to be sufficient. As many Afghans stress, Afghanistan's capacity and corruption challenges cannot be solved overnight. So the elections might more appropriately be thought of as a catalyst of a longer-term, constitutionally-based political process.

The risks posed by a lack of resolution to Afghanistan's current electoral crisis, or even by a markedly protracted resolution process, are potentially quite severe: a paralyzed government apparatus unable to take care of its citizens, pressure on loyalties within the security forces, and mounting disenchantment among the Afghan people coupled with a growing tendency to hedge, that is, to make sure they are on the team of one or another influential individual, with all the

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<sup>25</sup> Interviews with Afghans active in civil society, 2012, 2013, 2014.

mutual exclusivity that such dynamics suggest. At best, if the election fails, Afghanistan might muddle through for some time; at worst, it might dissolve into patches of violence or worse. Either scenario would give ample opportunity to the insurgency, to violent extremists, and to self-interested powerbrokers of all stripes, to capitalize on the disarray for their own benefit.

Opportunities for risk mitigation in the arena of governance may be somewhat limited. Significant recent diplomatic efforts may have helped encourage a more credible presidential election process or at least helped avert a crisis. Yet whatever the efficacy of those recent interventions, future U.S. leverage and influence are likely to diminish markedly, as U.S. forces draw down and tangible U.S. assistance decreases.

## **Pakistan**

Most observers agree that it is difficult to imagine a stable Afghanistan in isolation, without taking into consideration the broader region.

The country most intimately intertwined with Afghanistan's future is Pakistan. The relationship is necessarily an intimate one – the international border between them, the British-drawn Durand Line, cuts through territory inhabited, on both sides, by sizable ethnic Pashtun populations. Yet the relationship is also fraught – Afghan insurgents have long taken advantage of the largely porous border to enjoy safe haven and other forms of support inside Pakistan; and Afghanistan has frequently served as an arena for proxy contestation between the nuclear-armed states of Pakistan and India.

Many practitioners point to great potential for a mutually beneficial Afghan-Pakistani future strategic partnership, based on mutual recognition of sovereignty and shared interests in economic opportunity and security. Yet to date, observers note, a fundamental lack of good faith persists. That gap at the strategic level, many point out, increases the volatility of tactical-level border disputes; frustrates efforts to reduce or eliminate safe havens that directly support insurgent activities in Afghanistan; and complicates Pakistan's involvement in efforts to broker a political settlement in Afghanistan.

U.S. government policy has long recognized the central importance of Pakistan to Afghanistan's future, but has struggled to formulate an effective, strategically-grounded approach for shaping regional dynamics. One major premise of the 2009 Assessment was that Pakistan would need to take some action to help curb the use of safe havens in Pakistan by Afghan insurgents, in order for the campaign to succeed. Based on that premise – and with greater force density and a more robust command architecture – ISAF intensified its efforts to foster trilateral (Afghan-Pakistani-ISAF) mil-to-mil contacts at the tactical level, including border coordination meetings, and at the operational level, including planning conferences. Those outreach efforts experienced major setbacks in the wake of the May 2011 U.S. operation that targeted Osama bin Laden, and the November 2011 border incident at Salala, Pakistan, in which a number of Pakistani soldiers were killed or wounded. Mil-to-mil ties have since been rejuvenated. Some observers and practitioners have been encouraged by Pakistan's recent and long-awaited launching of military operations in North Waziristan, in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA), which has long provided refuge for the leadership of the Afghan Taliban-affiliated Haqqani network.

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Yet both tactical-level challenges such as cross-border fires, and strategic-level challenges including a fundamental lack of good faith, persist.<sup>26</sup> And some observers question the extent to which tactical-level mil-to-mil ties can “aggregate up” to constructively re-shape political relationships; they suggest that political-level engagement may also be essential to genuinely change the calculus and approach of either state.

The U.S. troop drawdown from Afghanistan introduces additional risk into these already volatile dynamics, by reducing opportunities for the U.S. to broker Afghan-Pakistani mil-to-mil relationships at both the tactical and strategic levels. More broadly, diminished U.S. military engagement in the region may reduce the time and attention in Washington dedicated to thinking strategically about Pakistan – a far-greater long-term security concern for the United States than Afghanistan, by almost any measure – amidst the panoply of competing U.S. national security priorities.

One approach to mitigating risk might be further raising the relative priority of facilitating the Afghan-Pakistani mil-to-mil relationship, while the United States still has a four-star commander on the ground in Kabul. Yet that effort has long been high among the priorities of the ISAF Commander – it is not obvious that any stones have been left unturned. Another possible mitigation would be a clear U.S. policy decision to give relatively high priority to the South Asia region even after the U.S. troop drawdown from Afghanistan, including crafting rigorous strategy that leverages all instruments of U.S. national power to help shape a stable region.

## Economics

The biggest elephant in the room, in terms of Afghanistan’s future, may be this: who will pay for Afghanistan’s security? Sustaining security gains will require some combination of international contributions and Afghan economic viability. Economic viability is also critical in a broader way – to provide the Afghan people with the prospect of future opportunity and thus help secure their participation in building Afghanistan’s future.

Few believe that Afghanistan will be able to generate revenue, collect that revenue, and execute budgets, sufficiently to cover the costs of its own security, any time soon. Afghanistan is blessed with substantial natural resources – as well as human capital – but realizing gains will require sustained security, further development of infrastructure, and the establishment of a legal architecture sufficiently reassuring to would-be foreign investors.

Efforts by the international community to help Afghans foster a working economy have been decidedly mixed. Years of relatively indiscriminate spending by the international community led to an array of unproductive or counterproductive results, including an inability to track money spent; the flow of assistance funds out of the country; the distortion of labor markets; investment in systems or components that Afghans did not want or could not sustain; and the empowerment of “thugs.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> See McChrystal Assessment, 2009. Interviews with ISAF officials, 2009-2014. See Investigation into the Incident in Vicinity of the Salala Checkpoint on the Night of 25-26 Nov 2011, redacted, a report by Brigadier General Stephen A. Clark, U.S. Central Command, December 26, 2011, available at <http://www.centcom.mil/images/stories/Crossborder/report%20exsum%20further%20redacted.pdf>.

<sup>27</sup> Interviews with ISAF and U.S. officials, 2009-2014.

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Recent years have witnessed somewhat stronger collaboration between the international community and the Afghan Government, and within the international community, aimed at crafting and pursuing a single approach toward further economic development. The so-called Kabul process encouraged a shared focus on prioritized Afghan systems including infrastructure, transportation, financial mechanisms, the judicial sector, and human capital. At the July 2012 Tokyo Conference, participants pledged support through the Decade of Transformation and affirmed their commitment to the Kabul Process principles.<sup>28</sup> Yet even a ten-year timeline, to establish a functioning economy, seems distinctly ambitious.

For the international community, in turn, despite its pledges of long-term support, Afghanistan is but one of many foreign assistance imperatives, all of which face competition from domestic exigencies, putting in some doubt whether international pledges to date are likely to be fully realized. Potential donors are likely to be eager for reassurance that any further funding they provide would be wisely and accountably utilized by the Afghan Government. Providing such reassurance grows more difficult as the international presence in Afghanistan diminishes – and with it, the ability not only to shape but also simply to monitor. Potential donors are also likely to want to know for how long international support would be necessary, and when the Afghan Government might realistically assume an increasing share of the financial burden.

The risks posed by a lack of funding for the ANSF are profound: without it, Afghanistan’s security architecture would almost certainly collapse – quickly – and perhaps with it the Afghan state. The risks posed by the lack of good prospects for future economic viability are sobering: the loss of the confidence of the Afghan people in the future and unwillingness to invest in it with their work and their lives; donor unwillingness to contribute; and, again, a resulting collapse of the Afghan state.

The risk of international disengagement might be mitigated in part by a robust conversation with national capitals about future funding requirements over time, including realistic assessments of Afghanistan’s own ability to contribute. It might also be mitigated by more concerted attempts by the international community to pool their efforts and leverage the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) and other tools in support of Afghan-led economic development efforts. These two steps, in turn, could help boost the prospects for the genuine economic opportunity that most Afghans hope to see.

## **A Final Word about Risk**

“Risks” are not foreordained circumstances unfolding before our eyes. They are the potential hazards that result from deliberate choices not to plan or resource against certain concerns. We choose to assume risks...they are the chinks in our armor that we know are there.

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<sup>28</sup> Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Towards a Self-Sustaining Afghanistan: An Economic Transition Strategy*, November 29, 2011; Afghanistan and the International Community: *From Transition to the Transformation Decade*, Conference Conclusions, the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, December 5, 2011; and *Tokyo Declaration: Partnership for Self-Reliance in Afghanistan*, from *Transition to Transformation*, from the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan, July 8, 2012.

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Stability in Afghanistan is distinctly fragile, and unsustainable without progress in a number of discrete arenas. It is subject to risks that are in part the direct results of U.S. choices. One of the greatest risks looking ahead is that, in the mad rush of competing global crises, the U.S. Government will not be able to find time to think about Afghanistan – it will effectively decide not to decide. This time of political change and security transition in Afghanistan affords an opportunity to ensure that further decision-making – about troop levels, timelines, assistance in all guises, and about how much this effort matters – is driven as much as possible by rigorous, reflective strategic thought.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify about these issues, and I look forward to your questions.

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