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The Road to Successful Transition in Afghanistan: From Here to the December 2010 Review

Summary

- The next seven months leading up to the December policy review will be crucial for Afghanistan's future; at that time the Obama administration—and the citizens of Afghanistan, the United States and ISAF nations—will make a judgment about progress towards stability there.
- Afghans and Americans need to set a course for success, and reach an agreement of what realistic, achievable progress means, and how to accomplish it.
- Afghan leadership, ownership and responsibility are critical.
- President Karzai's visit to Washington, the upcoming Peace Jirga in late May, the international conference in Kabul in July, and a possible new framework for exploitation of natural resources provide opportunities for the Afghan government to demonstrate its commitment to accountable governance and economic development.
- This year provides the U.S. and international community opportunities to demonstrate their long-term commitment to Afghanistan's future as a viable, independent state, capable of protecting its people and providing for their well being.
- Specifically, the U.S. should renew and commit to a long-term partnership with Afghanistan that spells out American support for Afghanistan's stability past 2011.

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Overview

In December 2010, the U.S. government will evaluate progress made toward the primary objectives President Barack Obama laid out last December in his speech at West Point: reverse the momentum of the Taliban insurgency, enhance the capacity of the Afghan government and partner with Pakistan. The outcome of this assessment, as well as independent reports, will set the tone for debates across the U.S. and Europe, and Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the region about what should happen in July 2011, when President Obama said that the U.S. will begin withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan.

Each of these three critical objectives is strongly dependent upon the performance and legitimacy of the Afghan government. As with the recent operation in Marjah, the U.S. Marines may be able to clear villages, but they are not able to hold them and build government, infrastructure, and rule of law without competent and just Afghan officials in the lead. Indeed, community leaders warned President Hamid Karzai during a visit to Marjah that the Taliban were popular

there precisely because his government was so unpopular. This dynamic is even more evident in Kandahar—site of the next major ISAF effort this summer—where rampant corruption, warlordism and inter-tribal rivalries undermine support for the Karzai government. The Afghan government must not only be just, but also effective. A lynchpin of July 2011 will be whether U.S. forces can begin to successfully and sustainably transfer security responsibility to Afghan security forces.

Thus the Afghan government must simultaneously improve governance (and perceptions of its governance), enhance the performance of its security forces and its delivery of public services, and convince the U.S., NATO, Pakistan, and other regional actors that it is a credible, stable, and enduring partner. This is no easy feat, especially given the recent stresses to the U.S.-Afghan relationship, which have caused many to question whether the keystone partnership for Afghanistan's future is solid.

The Road to December

Starting with President Karzai's visit to Washington in May, the Afghans have an enormous—and indispensable—opportunity this year to make progress towards stability and sovereignty. It will be essential, however, to set realistic and achievable benchmarks to measure that progress. There are already a series of events scheduled to build momentum. These efforts must now be brought into a coherent and mutually reinforcing process.

Shortly after his meetings in Washington, President Karzai has called for a national Peace Jirga in late May to bring together community leaders from across the country to discuss his government's plans for reconciliation with insurgents and their reintegration into Afghanistan's economic, social and political landscape. Then in July, the world will converge in Afghanistan's capital for the Kabul Conference, where the international community will be expected to commit ongoing moral and financial support to Afghanistan's government. The Kabul Conference may be followed by a series of national consultations by the Afghan government intended to build domestic support and buy-in for its development and security agenda. The prospect of parliamentary elections also looms for the fall. Each event will highlight and test Afghan leadership and responsibility. At each step the international community must work to support and encourage greater Afghan ownership.

Mr. Karzai Goes to Washington

The U.S.-Afghan partnership has been tested in recent months. After over eight years of intensive partnership, the last four have witnessed serious decline, and both nations—their people and governments—have become defensive and frustrated. At the same time, the level of U.S. military, financial, and political commitment to Afghanistan has never been higher. It is essential for both presidents, and both nations, that the relationship returns to a more even keel.

The arrival to Washington of President Karzai along with most of his cabinet and key advisers is an opportunity for the two governments to realign their strategic interests, reaffirm their strong and enduring relationship, to build mutual trust and work to resolve areas of disagreement.

Key commitments from the government of Afghanistan include:

- President Karzai should commit to specific actions to improve governance from Kabul down to the district level. This includes taking serious, public steps to combat corruption, remove tainted officials, and punish past transgressions, including those responsible for fraud in the August 2009 elections.
- The Afghan government should commit to a transparent and accountable system of managing the exploitation of its natural resources. Massive deposits of copper, iron, rare earth elements, and carbon fuel resources could go a long way to making Afghanistan's government

economically self-sufficient. If handled improperly, they could become a resource curse, worsening corruption and governance.

- President Karzai should take increased ownership of the war effort in Afghanistan, becoming commander in chief of his forces and leading the charge against those who kill his police and civil servants on a daily basis.
- Finally, President Karzai should lay out his vision for political reconciliation with insurgents, addressing how he will deal with the fractures within his own coalition over this issue as well as U.S. and international concerns about having the Taliban in government.

In turn, the U.S. government should also take key steps:

- President Obama should allay fears that the U.S. will precipitously withdraw from Afghanistan in July 2011, commit to long-term engagement with Afghanistan and the region beyond 2011, possibly including longer-term security guarantees.
- The U.S. should reinforce its commitments to deliver its assistance to Afghanistan in a more effective, more coordinated manner, and more in line with key shared priorities, including the development of Afghan government capacity. This will include finding practical means to increase the volume of assistance provided through the Afghan government.
- President Obama should indicate that the U.S. is also in favor of a political settlement to the Afghan conflict, and lay out some critical concerns and red-lines for U.S. support and engagement in such a process.

The Peace Jirga

President Karzai has called for this national gathering to rally support for his efforts to bring insurgents, both foot soldiers and leaders, off of the battlefield and back into Afghan society. These efforts—while widely acknowledged as critical to ending the conflict—are also controversial both within Afghanistan and among the international community. If handled well, building widespread support for the process will be a positive step. However, if fissures erupt among key Afghan and international actors, it could derail the nascent political reconciliation process.

As the planning for the Peace Jirga goes forward, several considerations should be borne in mind. First, this process of consultation and participation should be the start, not end, of inclusiveness. Representatives from the entire country—including parliamentarians, women and other civil society representatives—must participate in and support the reconciliation effort. Second, political inclusion of insurgents, as well as opponents of the reconciliation process, will be needed. This has implications not only for the reconciliation process itself, but also the larger questions of power-sharing and the decentralization that Afghanistan's pluralistic polity will likely require. Finally, the norms and protection for the rights of Afghan citizens as explicitly stated in the Afghan constitution will be critical to winning international and domestic support.

The Kabul Process

In July 2010, the government of Afghanistan will host a three-part international conference, focusing on the transition to full Afghan sovereignty. First, Afghan government officials will meet to agree on political, security and economic plans and goals for the next five years. Second, the international community will join the discussion to evaluate progress since the London Conference last January and to recommit their support to new initiatives. Third, Afghan officials will take the process on the road, conducting a series of consultative meetings around the country to engage Afghan citizens in the process, tailoring it for local conditions.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This Peace Brief was written in advance of President Hamid Karzai's visit to Washington, D.C. by William B. Taylor, vice president of the Center for Post-Conflict Peace and Stability at the U.S. Institute of Peace, and Alex Thier, director for Afghanistan and Pakistan programs at USIP, and co-author and editor of "The Future of Afghanistan" (USIP, 2009). The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

The Kabul Conference should build on successful programs that already exist and create new national programs on the successful models of the National Solidarity Program (NSP) and the National Health Program; these could include microfinance, national telecommunications and agriculture initiatives. The conference should also focus attention on a crucial but under-resourced sector: the rule of law. While there is enormous investment in policing, much more can and must be done to provide ordinary Afghans with access to fair and effective justice. Finally, as Afghanistan moves to exploit its enormous natural resource wealth, it must commit to highly transparent and accountable regimes for tender, revenue collection and distribution models to ensure that its riches make it a Chile or Botswana, rather than a Congo.

All these efforts should be bound by principles of local engagement in planning, implementation and accountability. Programs succeed when there is a strong relationship between national resources, local governance, and citizen ownership and engagement. It is also critical that resources be spread evenly throughout the country, and not concentrated mostly in the least secure areas of the South and East. Programs should be decentralized to municipal and district governments by providing budget resources to provincial and district governors; the international community should provide advisers at these levels to develop budget-implementation capacity and ensure accountability.

The Kabul Conference is an opportunity for the international community to make concrete their individual and collective support, to evaluate and, if the evaluation is good, endorse the Afghan government's goals. The international community should indicate how they are following through on the pledges made at the London conference; the Afghan government should indicate how its commitments made at the London conference—anti-corruption and accountability—are being implemented. The emphasis should be on long-term development with long-term commitments.

If the elections scheduled for September can be conducted in a more transparent and fair manner than the elections last August, they should go forward on time. If not, the Afghan government and the international community should consider postponing them until the spring. Whenever they are held, the Afghan government must demonstrate that it can conduct free and fair elections. The international community's support should depend on the Afghan government's commitment to clean elections.

Conclusion

For its security, the international community needs a stable and responsible Afghanistan; for its development, the government of Afghanistan needs the international community. The next seven months are a time to recommit to, and build confidence in, each other. The government of Afghanistan has a four-step opportunity to succeed—or fail. We all have a stake in its success.



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