



In Brief:
Next Steps in the War in Afghanistan?
Issues for Congress

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On May 1, 2012, President Obama gave a speech from Bagram Air Field in which he laid out U.S. government approaches for “winding down” the war in Afghanistan.¹ While a number of observers have challenged the logical plausibility of a unilateral decision to “wind down” a war, the Administration’s commitment to decreasing U.S. involvement in the war in Afghanistan is clear.

As of mid-2012, many observers point to a coalescing vision of the way forward—shared by the governments of the United States, Afghanistan, and other international partners—that includes bringing the current campaign to a close by the end of 2014, and pursuing a political settlement among the parties in conflict, while extending U.S. and other international commitments to Afghanistan beyond 2014. In evaluating this emerging vision, some observers emphasize that the overall level of ambition has been lowered, while others stress that the timeline for international engagement has been extended. For the U.S. government, the broad strategic issues at stake in the war in Afghanistan continue to include:

- What fundamental national security interests does the United States have in Afghanistan and the region?
- What minimum conditions—political, economic, security—would need to pertain in Afghanistan in order for those U.S. interests to be protected?
- How appropriate are current and projected future U.S. approaches, until and after 2014, for helping Afghans establish those conditions?
- When and to what extent are Afghans likely to be able to sustain those conditions with relatively limited support from the international community?
- Ultimately, how important is this overall effort—given its likely timeline, risks, and costs—compared to other U.S. government priorities?

At this apparent turning point in both strategic thinking and activity on the ground, this short report considers issues that may be of interest to Congress as it considers the strength and duration of further U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, to 2014 and beyond.²

Background

Since assuming office, the Obama Administration has articulated two consistent core goals for the war—to defeat al-Qaeda and to prevent future safe havens in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Less clear to many observers is exactly what it would take to prevent future safe havens.³

¹ Remarks by President Obama in Address to the Nation from Afghanistan, May 1, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/remarks-president-address-nation-afghanistan>.

² For further analysis related to Afghanistan, see additional CRS reports by Amy Belasco, Susan Chesser, Catherine Dale, Kenneth Katzman, Alan Kronstadt, Rhoda Margesson, Moshe Schwartz, Curt Tarnoff, Liana Wyler.

³ 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/. 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.

Much of the rationale behind current U.S. government civilian and military efforts in Afghanistan 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. That assessment, and the subsequent ISAF campaign design, were based on the Administration's two core goals as well as on the novel prospect of more troops, more civilian expertise, more resources, more highest-level leadership attention, and relatively unlimited time.⁴

Subsequently, four major sets of constraints were imposed on the effort:

- In December 2009, in a major policy speech at West Point, President Obama announced both that a troop surge would take place, and that those troops would begin to draw down in July 2011.⁵
- In November 2010, at the NATO Lisbon Summit, the Afghan government and the NATO Allies, including the United States, agreed on a formal "Transition" process, in which responsibility for security would transition to the Afghan government. This process would begin in early 2011 and would be completed by the end of 2014.⁶
- In June 2011, President Obama announced parameters for drawing down the surge forces. From the surge peak of about 100,000 U.S. troops, the U.S. troop commitment to Afghanistan would draw down by 10,000 troops by the end of 2011, and by a further 23,000 by the end of September 2012, reaching a total of 68,000 by that date. Afterwards, the pace of further drawdowns would be "steady" and at some point the mission would change "from combat to support."⁷
- In May 2012, at the NATO Chicago Summit, the Afghan government and NATO Allies confirmed that the ISAF mission would be completed by the end of 2014, that Afghans would assume lead responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan by mid-2013, and that at that milestone international forces would shift to playing a primarily supporting role.⁸

At the same time, the timeline for the commitment of the international community to Afghanistan has been extended well past 2014—out to 2024, covering the 10-year period of "Transformation" designed to follow Transition. At the NATO Chicago Summit, participants affirmed that the partnership with Afghanistan would continue beyond the conclusion of the current campaign. And the recently finalized U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement (SPA)—a statement of

⁴ 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. The author was part of that assessment team.

⁵ 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>.

⁶ NATO Lisbon Summit Declaration, Lisbon, Portugal, November 20, 2010, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm?mode=pressrelease.

⁷ 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>.

⁸ Chicago Summit Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Chicago on 20 May 2012, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87593.htm?mode=pressrelease.

mutual commitment in multiple arenas—is scheduled to remain in force throughout the Transformation period.⁹

Some practitioners and observers, pointing to the series of tightening constraints, note that the overall campaign remains based on the same two core goals but must now meet them with less time and fewer resources. For some, that raises a basic question: to what extent, if any, do recent additional constraints on time and resources introduce greater risk—in terms of cost, time, casualties, or ability to accomplish the mission? Others suggest that any such risks may be mitigated to some extent by the longer timeline for international commitment, depending on what forms that commitment takes.

Current Debates

For some observers, the U.S. debates about the way forward in Afghanistan are apparently over—a strategic direction has been adopted and the only remaining questions concern execution. Others suggest otherwise, noting that rarely is an adopted policy framework completely immutable, and pointing to an array of choices within the current policy framework concerning the extent of further U.S. commitment and the forms it might take.

Troop Levels and the Campaign

For many observers, whether supporters or critics of the effort, U.S. troop levels are the starting point of the debates—the most powerful, visible marker of the extent of U.S. commitment and an indication of how far the fight has progressed. A number of observers have argued for “accelerating” the pace of U.S. troop drawdowns from Afghanistan, while others, including some commanders on the ground, have supported keeping as many troops in theater as possible through the 2013 fighting season, as well as a residual troop presence after 2014.

Over the past year, basic policy parameters for future U.S. troop levels have become clearer. In his May 2012 speech at Bagram, President Obama confirmed that after the return to the pre-surge level of 68,000 troops by September 2012, further drawdowns would continue at a steady pace. While the precise timing of those further drawdowns has not yet been announced, ISAF Commander General Allen has stated that after the “surge recovery” is completed, he will assess conditions and then provide the President with recommendations regarding further drawdowns. Beyond 2014, the President has added, some U.S. troops may remain in Afghanistan—pending the outcome of U.S.-Afghan negotiations designed to achieve a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA)—to pursue “two narrow security missions”, counter-terrorism and training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).¹⁰

⁹ *Ibid.*, and Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspasignedtext.pdf>.

¹⁰ See Remarks by President Obama in Address to the Nation from Afghanistan, May 1, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/remarks-president-address-nation-afghanistan>; and DoD News Briefing with General John Allen from the Pentagon, May 23, 2012, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5040>. Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) on March 22, 2012, Gen Allen stated that 68,000 is a “good going-in number” for thinking about U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan. NATO, for its part, has announced the intention to establish a new “training, advising and assistance mission” in (continued...)

For those for whom the primary imperative is to bring the troops home, the conditions on the ground in Afghanistan may be largely irrelevant. But for those concerned with outcomes in Afghanistan, it may be helpful to consider the troop numbers debate in terms of both remaining requirements and the contributions of all non-U.S. forces in Afghanistan—including the extent of coalition contributions, and the capacity and capabilities of the ANSF.

Campaign-driven requirements have evolved somewhat in recent years:

- In 2009, the McChrystal assessment introduced geographic prioritization of effort across the entire Afghan theater. The campaign named southern Afghanistan, including the Taliban’s traditional homeland in Kandahar province, and its breadbasket next door in Helmand province, the “main effort.” Parts of eastern Afghanistan, where insurgents, particularly the Haqqani network, enjoyed sanctuaries and transit routes out to safe havens in Pakistan, were the collective second priority. The designation of the south as the main effort—designed in part to send a signal of resolve to the Taliban—also had practical implications in terms of the allocation of forces, the availability of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, and Afghan and coalition leadership time and attention.¹¹
- Three years later, commanders on the ground point to significant progress against the Taliban in the south but argue that it’s not over there yet—a substantial Afghan army and police force, backed up by coalition forces, will be required in order to consolidate the gains achieved. ISAF has been reluctant to formally shift the campaign’s main effort to the east, given both the strategic significance of Kandahar and the implications that would carry for the availability of personnel and resources in the south.
- Meanwhile, the security challenges in eastern Afghanistan have grown, if anything, increasingly complex. Afghan and coalition forces operating in eastern Afghanistan have given top priority to protecting Kabul and securing the provinces immediately south of it, down Highway 1 toward Kandahar. That was in part a response to increased targeting of Kabul by the Haqqani network, who were reportedly pressured by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) to do so. But the relatively limited availability of forces has meant relatively deliberate progress. Key supporting efforts for the combined force in eastern Afghanistan include continuing to disrupt Haqqani movement and sanctuaries in their traditional tribal homeland, further to the east, and also securing the long border with Pakistan—a particular challenge in part because of all the Afghan security forces, the Afghan Border Police have benefited the least from close unit-to-unit partnership with coalition forces. Further, ISAF officials have observed,

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Afghanistan, after the conclusion of the ISAF mission at the end of 2014. See Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan issued by the Heads of State and Government of Afghanistan and Nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), May 21, 2012, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87595.htm.

¹¹ General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, note 2, *supra*; and interviews with ISAF officials 2009, 2010, 2011.

sometimes with bewilderment, the strong and growing focus of senior Afghan security officials on relatively remote Nuristan and upper Kunar provinces.¹²

Another important component of the requirement for U.S. troops concerns the contributions likely to be provided over time by other security forces. Key troop contributors to ISAF have signaled their intent to drawdown or withdraw altogether, and the ISAF mission as a whole is scheduled to conclude by the end of 2014.¹³ The ANSF—which will in any case bear the long-term responsibility—are scheduled to grow to a target endstrength of 352,000, including both army and police, by October 2012. Participants at the NATO Chicago Summit broadly agreed on a subsequent “gradual managed force reduction...to a sustainable level”, with a working target of 228,500.¹⁴

Real future contributions of the ANSF are likely to depend not only on total endstrength, but also on their operational effectiveness and the institutional abilities of the Afghan system to manage and supply them; on the force mix (including high-end forces, regular army, police, border police) within the total endstrength; on contributions from auxiliary entities such as the Afghan Local Police (ALP), community-based forces vetted by local traditional leaders and under the formal authority of the Ministry of Interior; and on key decisions about force employment including where to focus and where to assume risk.

Questions that might help inform the debates about the next steps for U.S. troop levels include:

- How much must the level of insurgent threat in Afghanistan be reduced, to help ensure that Afghan forces can contend successfully with the residual challenge with minimal international assistance? To what extent is the participation of U.S. forces in combined operations now with Afghan partners still necessary to reduce that threat sufficiently?
- What other purposes does a U.S. force presence need to serve, if any, toward meeting U.S. core goals—for example, serving as a deterrent to those who would challenge Afghanistan’s sovereignty, or providing leverage for U.S. efforts to help shape a broader political settlement process aimed at ending the war?
- To what extent if any must the objectives of the combined campaign be scaled back given the constraints on the scope and duration of future U.S. troop presence?
- How should differences be reconciled when Afghan and U.S. campaign priorities diverge?
- How good do Afghan forces need to be, to contend effectively with a residual insurgent threat? What total ANSF endstrength, and what force mix, will that

¹² Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011; and Department of Defense, Report on Progress Toward Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” April 2012, available at http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/Report_Final_SecDef_04_27_12.pdf.

¹³ For example, it is the French stated intent to withdraw all of its forces by the end of 2012, and the United Kingdom has announced that as a first step it will withdraw 500 of its 9,500 troops in 2012. See Carol Matlock, “France Confirms Afghanistan Troop Withdrawal Plan, AFP Reports,” Bloomberg, June 9, 2012; and Nick Hopkins, “500 Troops To Be Withdrawn from Afghanistan, Says Defence Secretary,” The Guardian, April 26, 2012.

¹⁴ Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan issued by the Heads of State and Government of Afghanistan and Nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), May 21, 2012, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87595.htm.

- require over time? How much risk, and of what kinds, do incremental reductions in future ANSF endstrength introduce?
- To what extent is a continued U.S. force presence after 2014—and with what force mix, and for how long—necessary to help bolster ANSF ability?
 - To what extent if any does Afghan reliance on the ALP—typically deeply rooted in local communities, but not trained to the level of regular forces, and regarded skeptically by regular security force leaders as lacking national-level loyalties—contribute to or alternatively threaten Afghanistan’s future stability?

Transition and Change of Mission

All major stakeholders have agreed that central to the way forward in Afghanistan is shifting increasing responsibility for security to Afghan forces. That shift is codified at the strategic level in the formal process of Transition, and it is often discussed, at the operational level, in terms of a “change of mission” for U.S. and other international forces. The two concepts are linked but not isomorphic, and they are often poorly understood, in part because the premises of Transition have changed over time and because the role of coalition forces on the ground is constantly evolving. The greatest danger, some observers suggest, may be logically conflating formal shifts with actual improvements in the competence of Afghan forces.

The concept of transition has evolved since its launch several years ago:

- President Karzai introduced the terms and timeline of the debate, in his November 2009 presidential inaugural address and in his opening remark to the January 2010 London Conference. He argued that within five years—by the end of 2014—Afghan would “take the lead in ensuring security and stability across the country.”¹⁵
- At the NATO Lisbon Summit in November 2010, NATO and Afghanistan codified the Transition process, by which lead responsibility for security would transition from coalition forces to Afghans, place by place across the country in a series of tranches; and Afghans would exercise full responsibility for security across the country by the end of 2014. Decisions to begin the transition process were to be “conditions-based”, drawing not only on security conditions and the abilities of the ANSF in a given location, but also on the extent of competent governance.
- By the NATO Chicago Summit in May 2012, an approach driven more by timelines than conditions had emerged.¹⁶ The governments of Afghanistan and

¹⁵ See President Karzai, Inauguration Speech, November 19, 2009; and President Karzai, Opening Remarks, London Conference, January 28, 2010.

¹⁶ Most observers agree that there are substantial differences in conditions among the Transition tranches announced so far. Tranche 1, announced in March 2011, included benign locales such as Panjshir and Bamiyan provinces, which had barely if at all suffered from malign external influence. Tranche 2, announced in November 2011, included former hot spots in the campaign’s main effort in the south, including Marja, Nawa and Nad-e Ali districts of Helmand province, where sustained combined operations over time had significantly degraded the insurgency. Tranche 3, announced in May 2012, included 122 districts as well as all remaining provincial capitals—covering a wide array of security and governance conditions. Remaining territory includes, significantly, much of the area along Afghanistan’s eastern border with Pakistan. See NATO Backgrounder, “Transition to Afghan Lead: Inteqal,” available at <http://www.nato.int/> (continued...)

troop-contributing nations agreed on a new “milestone”—that all parts of Afghanistan would begin the process of transition, and thus that Afghans would be in the lead everywhere, by mid-2013.¹⁷ Many observers agree that while such an approach may have utility in terms of encouraging Afghans to do more, or in terms of communicating progress to external audiences, a timeline-driven approach loses its utility as a *measure* of progress.

When U.S. military commanders on the ground talk about transition—which Gen Allen has called “the linchpin of our strategy”¹⁸—they generally mean not the policy decisions per se but rather the growing capabilities of their Afghan counterparts, and the corresponding evolution of the role of their own forces. The concept of shifting “from combat to support” has engendered some confusion by suggesting a flip-of-the-switch change on a date certain. In fact, the relationship between Afghan and coalition forces has evolved continually and markedly over time:

- One of the central tenets of the 2009 McChrystal review was the need for enhanced “unit partnering,” in which like Afghan and coalition units live, train, plan, and execute together, 24/7. The premise is that partnering jumpstarts a partner force’s capabilities, including leadership, by “showing” not just “telling.” In this construct, coalition units are bolstering their partners’ capabilities while participating directly in combined operations targeting the insurgencies.¹⁹
- As unit partnering matured, particularly with the Afghan National Army, coalition forces leaned forward into the next phase—drawing back, doing less themselves, and encouraging Afghans to make Afghan systems work. Key questions from ISAF commanders to their own subordinates included: What essential things does your Afghan partner unit still have a hard time with? What is your plan to help them get there? How much time will that take? In contrast to a blanket “mission change” declaration, such de facto transition has taken place unit-by-unit, and location-by-location.²⁰ Senior officials have stressed that even as U.S. forces step back they will remain “combat-capable.”²¹
- Meanwhile, 2012 has witnessed the introduction to theater of Security Force Assistance Advisor Teams (SFAATs)—small teams that embed with much larger

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nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_topics/20120516_media_backgrounder_transition_en.pdf.

¹⁷ Yet some rhetorical confusion persists about what that 2013 milestone signifies. President Obama stated that it would signal ANSF lead “for combat operations”; Gen Allen stated that ANSF would move into the lead for “counter-insurgency”; while formal NATO rhetoric, broadly reinforcing Gen Allen’s statement, indicates that Afghans will assume the lead for security writ large. See Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan issued by the Heads of State and Government of Afghanistan and Nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), May 21, 2012, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87595.htm; Remarks by President Obama in Address to the Nation from Afghanistan, May 1, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/05/01/remarks-president-address-nation-afghanistan>; and DoD News Briefing with Gen John Allen from the Pentagon, May 23, 2012, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5040>.

¹⁸ DoD News Briefing with Gen John Allen from the Pentagon, May 23, 2012, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5040>.

¹⁹ General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, and interviews with ISAF officials, 2009 and 2010.

²⁰ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011 and 2012.

²¹ DoD News Briefing with Gen John Allen from the Pentagon, May 23, 2012, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5040>.

Afghan units to provide advisory support and some connectivity to the larger coalition force. Commanders underscore that the shift from unit partnership to advisory teams should not necessarily be consecutive—what makes better sense is to gradually decrease the roles played by coalition force partner units, to introduce advisory teams, to “let Afghan units fail” to some extent, but to maintain a sufficient coalition combat force presence during that process to “pick up the pieces” or prevent catastrophic failure if necessary.²²

An even deeper change in the mission of U.S. forces in Afghanistan is contemplated after 2014. The signed SPA commits the U.S. and Afghan governments to begin negotiations on a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), to be completed within one year, to govern any future U.S. force presence; and it suggests that future roles might include combating al Qaeda and affiliates and training the ANSF.²³

Questions that might help inform the debates about transition and change of mission include:

- Under an advisory construct, what is the proper division of labor over time between coalition units and advisory teams?
- To what extent does an increased emphasis on developing ANSF counterparts come at the expense of continuing to reduce the threats insurgents pose to stability in Afghanistan? Or can increasingly capable ANSF backed up by coalition forces make roughly similar progress?
- As the ANSF assume greater responsibilities, is it acceptable—or even desirable, as a spur toward learning—for them to “fail” in some ways?
- How appropriate—and clearly understood—are U.S. and coalition standards for knowing when to step in?
- What effects, exactly, might a post-2014 U.S. military presence in Afghanistan be designed to achieve?

Economy

Afghanistan’s ability to sustain itself after reductions in contributions by the international community was long the little-discussed “elephant in the room” in strategic-level debates, perhaps because the challenge seemed so daunting. More recently, however, the Afghan Government and the international community have worked more concertedly on realistic economic development plans.

That intensified focus was catalyzed in part by one of the largest looming challenges—sustaining the ANSF. In that arena, the NATO Chicago Summit unveiled a compromise way forward: ANSF endstrength will be sustained at its peak level of 352,000 troops until approximately 2017, then reduced to approximately 228,500 troops; the international community will initially contribute the

²² Interviews with U.S. official, 2011 and 2012.

²³ Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspassignedtext.pdf>.

lion's share of the estimated \$4.1 billion annual bill to sustain the force; and the Afghan Government will increasingly assume financial responsibility.²⁴

New economic approaches, at both strategic and operational levels, moderate earlier aspirations and attempt to map plans against a timeline:

- At the strategic level, key documents associated with the so-called Kabul Process stress bringing international assistance on-budget and aligning activities by Afghan priorities. They emphasize focusing on prioritized Afghan systems—infrastructure, transportation, financial mechanisms, the judicial sector, and human capital—and making them work.²⁵
- At the operational level, practitioners refer to a “paradigm shift” in both the theory and practice of U.S. civilian and military assistance efforts. The new operational-level thinking is based on the same basic tenet—making Afghan systems work—with a practical focus on doing less and spending less money directly while providing technical assistance. Many practitioners and observers argue that a shift in economic approaches is long overdue, since years of relatively indiscriminate spending led to an array of unproductive or counterproductive results. These, it is argued, have included 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.”²⁶

Questions that might help inform the debates about the next steps for Afghanistan's economy include:

- What kind of a system can the likely future Afghan economy—barring exogenous shocks to the system—realistically be expected to support?
- What legal constructs and accountability mechanisms would have to be in place, and what other minimum conditions met, in order for Afghanistan to realize its maximum potential—given its mineral resources and potential agricultural productivity—as a fiscally self-sufficient state?

²⁴ Chicago Summit Declaration on Afghanistan issued by the Heads of State and Government of Afghanistan and Nations contributing to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), May 21, 2012, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87595.htm.

²⁵ See Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Towards a Self-Sustaining Afghanistan: An Economic Transition Strategy*, November 29, 2011; and Afghanistan and the International Community: From Transition to the Transformation Decade, Conference Conclusions, the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, December 5, 2011, available at http://eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/docs/2011_11_conclusions_bonn_en.pdf. For more explicitly U.S. Government perspective, see National Security Staff, *U.S. Economic Strategy for Afghanistan*, December 2, 2011, crafted in response to the Ike Skelton National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2011, P.L. 111-383, January 7, 2011, Section 1535; and Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspassignedtext.pdf>.

²⁶ Interviews with U.S. Embassy Kabul and ISAF officials, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012. The November 2010 Bonn concluding document also stressed the shift from service delivery to capacity-building, see Afghanistan and the International Community: From Transition to the Transformation Decade, Conference Conclusions, the International Afghanistan Conference in Bonn, December 5, 2011, available at http://eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/docs/2011_11_conclusions_bonn_en.pdf.

- As the balance of U.S. support shifts from providing things—a role that has given the U.S. government a prominent seat at the table—to providing advice, will the U.S. government be able to maintain sufficient leverage—for example, to encourage accountability and to help shape a political settlement process?
- Given that most observers agree that it will take time for Afghans to develop the ability to generate, collect, and spend revenues, and that international assistance is likely to diminish significantly in the near-term, what are the risks to Afghan stability in the near-term? To what extent and in what ways might the international community help mitigate these risks?
- While recent commitments from the U.S. Government and NATO extend the timeline of “commitment” out to 2024, how realistic is that longer timeline for Afghans to build a largely self-sustaining economy? What minimum conditions would that require, and what is it possible to achieve by the end of the period of transformation in 2024?
- Professions of commitment notwithstanding, how much assistance are members of the international community likely to provide to Afghanistan through 2024, given the significant financial pressures and competing demands that they are likely to face?
- In a very practical sense, to what extent will the significant reduction in the U.S. troop presence over time affect the ability of U.S. Government civilians to support Afghan development efforts in a still-somewhat-unsettled security environment? What useful lessons might be drawn from the somewhat analogous so-called “transition” in Iraq, including the validity of the planning assumptions applied in that case?²⁷
- To what extent does the proposed dramatic reduction in ANSF total endstrength—designed in part to significantly reduce pressure on the future Afghan budget—introduce additional risk? To what extent will a smaller total force be able to protect Afghan interests, and U.S. interests in the region? How can Afghanistan best mitigate the risks, financial and otherwise, of demobilizing thousands of young men with well-developed weapons skills but few other economic prospects?

Governance

An array of triggers—including the 2010 Kabul Bank crisis, doubts about Afghanistan’s political future after its 2014 presidential elections, and a heightened sense that the leverage of the international community may diminish with troop drawdowns and decreased assistance—has pushed the Afghanistan debates to recognize the importance of “good governance” to Afghanistan’s future stability but also to weigh “how much is enough.” Many observers point to an apparent lowering of expectations in this arena on the part of the international community.

- The 2009 McChrystal assessment argued boldly that governance should be on par with security as a focus of the campaign. The basic theory was that the primary

²⁷ Many observers have suggested that the use of the term “transition” in Iraq was often misunderstood as suggesting an assumption by the Department of State of all the roles previously played by DoD.

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. Accountability measures—of which, after decades of upheaval, Afghanistan enjoyed few—might include everything from formal elections, to the traditional voice of inclusive local councils, to a vibrant media, to a robust civil society. If the people viewed government officials as looking out for themselves and not for the people, they would be more likely to reject the system and to refuse to participate in it. So, the theory ran, the international community—while it enjoyed significant leverage—should help the Afghan people foster accountable governance.²⁸

- Subsequently, some of the international community’s efforts to support good governance matured and bore fruit. At sub-national levels of governance, the international community, prompted by complaints by Afghan local communities, worked with Afghan ministries to bring about the removal—not just the “recycling” to other posts—of some particularly pernicious district-level officials.²⁹
- At higher levels of authority within the Afghan system, the challenges proved more intractable. Some international practitioners long argued for seeking the removal from office of Afghan powerbrokers—such as Brigadier General Razziq, the Acting Provincial Chief of Police in Kandahar, and Governor Sherzai of Nangarhar province—who were perceived by some to be working for themselves rather than for all the Afghan people in their respective areas. Yet it was a more pragmatic, laissez-faire approach toward governance that gained traction: “shaping” the incentive structure for some powerbrokers and encouraging them to behave more, rather than less, constructively. Broadly in this vein, some practitioners contended that the international community, with its limited language skills and cultural awareness, could hardly be savvy enough to understand all the subtleties of Afghan relationship networks and power structures. Others argued that *de facto* Afghan authority structures, including powerbrokers who naturally command attention when they walk into the room and can “get things done,” might be a sufficient basis for stability in the Afghan context.³⁰
- The most recent strategic guidance reflects the growing view that fostering good governance is really hard and takes time. Key documents still call for countering corruption, but with a subtle shift: countering corruption is now overwhelmingly an Afghan responsibility, while the very circumscribed role of the international community is to foster specific Afghan capabilities. That change in approach is echoed in accounts from many U.S. Government civilian practitioners on the ground, who increasingly describe their roles in terms of building capacity rather than fostering accountability.³¹

²⁸ General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment.

²⁹ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2009, 2010, 2011.

³⁰ Interviews with U.S. Embassy Kabul and ISAF officials, 2011 and 2012.

³¹ Participants in the NATO Chicago Summit reminded the Afghan Government of its commitment “to a democratic society, based on the rule of law and good governance, including progress in the fight against corruption...” The U.S.-Afghan SPA describes a division of labor in which the Afghan Government will improve governance by increasing responsiveness and transparency, including efficiency and accountability at all levels, to better meet the Afghan people’s needs, while the U.S. will focus on capacity-building. Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011 and 2012, and see (continued...)

Questions that might help inform the debates about the next steps in Afghan governance include:

- What kind of durable stability can be achieved in a system based in part on self-interested powerbrokers largely unconstrained by accountability mechanisms? How might such an arrangement be expected to affect U.S. interests, if at all, in the longer-run?
- How do Afghans envisage “accountability” and the mechanisms necessary to make it work? What might the U.S. government do to support their vision?
- What forms of leverage, to encourage greater accountability, might the U.S. Government theoretically still be able to exercise, between now and 2014, and after 2014?
- To what extent do alternative voices in Afghanistan—including civil society, the private sector, the media, and traditional local authority structures—have the potential to provide a system of checks and balances by which the Afghan people can hold government accountable? To what extent are any such accountability measures likely to be able to exert influence to shape the 2014 presidential elections, or a reconciliation process designed to bring the war to an end?

Pakistan

Successful counter-insurgency generally relies on “smothering” an insurgency within a closed environment. Pakistan—Afghanistan’s permanent neighbor—has long posed a conundrum for the campaign in Afghanistan by offering safe havens to Afghan insurgent leaders and fighters. The access those havens provide to recruiting, financing, training, and leadership direction grossly complicates the campaign in Afghanistan, making it far more difficult to deprive the insurgencies of the “oxygen” lifelines they need.

The challenge these safe havens pose to the campaign has not abated over time:

- The 2009 McChrystal assessment deemed Pakistan a serious concern. Campaign planning at that time assumed that Pakistan would take some action against Afghan insurgent safe havens. Commanders considered that without such action, the risk to the campaign in Afghanistan would be substantial.³²
- Then for several years, cooperative initiatives flourished. These included border coordination meetings at the tactical level, combined trilateral planning (including both Pakistanis and Afghans) at the operational level, and coordinated operations on either side of the border designed to leave insurgents with nowhere to go. Commanders reported the strengthening of personal relationships through

(...continued)

Chicago Summit Declaration issued by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Chicago on 20 May 2012, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_87593.htm?mode=pressrelease; and Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspassignedtext.pdf>.

³² General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment.

- these activities. Yet Pakistani forces apparently remained unwilling, or incapable, or both, of taking action against Afghan insurgent safe havens.³³
- In 2011, two developments shattered any accumulated mutual confidence. The U.S. action against Osama bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan, on May 2, 2011, was viewed by some in Pakistan as an egregious violation of Pakistani sovereignty, but also left many in the U.S. with the view that bin Laden could not have found sanctuary for so long without some official Pakistani knowledge or support. The November 2011 cross-border in which, due to apparent miscommunications, U.S. fires killed Pakistani troops in Mohmand agency, led to some measure of Pakistani outrage.³⁴
 - As of mid-2012, U.S. officials cautiously report that efforts, such as consultations, have resumed, aimed at rebuilding mil-to-mil relationships with Pakistan. Goals include the resumption of tactical-level border coordination, including institutionalizing more effective communications to prevent repetitions of the November 2011 event; and the future conduct of coordinated operations on both sides of the border. Yet U.S. commanders suggest that their planning assumptions have changed considerably, compared to three years earlier—little to no Pakistani action against Afghan insurgent safe havens is expected. That means, they explain, greater requirements for Afghans to provide a bulwark against incursions, measured in terms of the strength of Afghan forces, the competence of the border regime, and the refusal of local Afghan communities to tolerate an insurgent presence in their midst. One more specific implication, commanders add, is the need to array the ANSF differently, with a greater focus on eastern Afghanistan, from the border to Kabul, than might otherwise have been planned.³⁵

Questions that might help inform the debates about the implications of persistent safe havens in Pakistan include:

- What results can realistically be expected in the near- to medium-term from U.S. and Afghan mil-to-mil engagement with Pakistani forces?
- To what extent might alternative approaches, such as U.S. drone strikes, be relied on to reduce the threat from Afghan insurgent safe havens inside Pakistan? How do the effects of a de-capitation drone strike compare to those of clearing and holding operations? What other risks if any do such strikes introduce?
- To what extent does current U.S. strategic thinking assume that a political settlement of the war in Afghanistan—a “deal”—would result in the permanent closure of safe havens? If circumstances in Pakistan do not change, what would

³³ Interviews with U.S., Afghan, Pakistani officials, 2009, 2010, 2011.

³⁴ Investigation into the Incident in Vicinity of the Salala Checkpoint on the Night of 25-26 Nov 2011, redacted, a report by Brig Gen Stephen A. Clark, U.S. Central Command, December 26, 2011, available at <http://www.centcom.mil/images/stories/Crossborder/report%20exsum%20further%20redacted.pdf>.

³⁵ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011 and 2012. And see Gen Allen, Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Afghanistan, transcript, March 22, 2012; and DoD News Briefing with LTG Curtis Scaparrotti, Commander, International Security Assistance Force Joint Command, June 11, 2012, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5059>.

prevent some current or future insurgent leaders from making use of the same safe havens?

- To what extent does the persistence of safe havens in Pakistan increase the requirements for Afghan resilience? What forms would that resilience have to take, to ensure that Afghan—and U.S.—interests are protected? What risks might any additional requirements pose to other aspects of the campaign, by reducing available resources?

How Does This End?

Many observers suggest that, particularly in the wake of the NATO Chicago Summit, an unprecedentedly clear “way forward” has emerged for in Afghanistan, including major components of the effort as well as a longer and more realistic timeline for international engagement. Yet some suggest that these major components are still not linked together in a single coherent strategic roadmap, one that begins with a vision of endstate that protects U.S. interests, includes the minimum essential conditions necessary to realize that endstate, articulates a strategic logic that connects the major components of the effort, and juxtaposes that roadmap against a clear timeline.

In particular, some suggest, grave conceptual confusion persists about how the war itself ends. In some circles, and in particular at the operational and tactical levels, it appears that the “theory of victory” for the war in Afghanistan, the logic that links current approaches to a desired endstate, is the gradual accretion of gains in Afghan civilian and security capability, together with an incrementally diminished insurgency. In other circles, primary emphasis is placed on achieving a negotiated settlement among the parties in conflict. The U.S. Government has clearly indicated its support for an Afghan-led process of reconciliation of former insurgent leaders.³⁶ Both of those logics, in turn, would seem to challenge the notion that the U.S. Government can unilaterally “wind down” the war.

Questions that might help inform the debates about how the war in Afghanistan ends include:

- How well do the major components of the effort—the campaign on the ground, and political settlement efforts including a reconciliation process, as well as economic and regional approaches—fit together and inform each other, in a single roadmap, against a timeline? What assumptions does that roadmap make? What risks does it allow?

³⁶ U.S. policy originally named three criteria—renunciation of al Qaeda, rejection of violence, and acceptance of the Afghan Constitution—as preconditions for participation in a reconciliation process, but was later revised, naming those criteria necessary “outcomes” of reconciliation, thereby lowering the bar to the start of talk. See “Clinton Backs Talks with Moderate Taliban,” CNN, March 31, 2009, based on her remarks at a conference at The Hague aimed at international support for stabilizing Afghanistan; and, announcing the shift, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Remarks at the Launch of the Asia Society’s Series of Richard C. Holbrooke Memorial Addresses, New York, NY, February 18, 2011, available at <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/02/156815.htm>. The SPA echoes that position, see Enduring Strategic Partnership Agreement between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, May 2, 2012, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistanspassignedtext.pdf>.

- As part of that comprehensive roadmap, what roles should the U.S. government play? What roles are more appropriately played by other actors, first of all Afghans, and also including other members of the international community?
- What are the respective roles of the campaign on the ground, and of political settlement efforts, in bringing the war in Afghanistan to a close? Does the campaign create conditions that may produce a political settlement? Does a well-crafted reconciliation bring the campaign on the ground to a close? Is either, or are both, essential?
- How inclusive must a settlement process be in order to help ensure the durability of any agreement achieved, and to counter-balance natural hedging behavior under the patronage of various power-brokers in the face of deep uncertainty about the future and decades of grim experience in the past? How important is the active participation in a national settlement process—not just the post facto buy-in—of key groups such as civil society, the media, and the private sector, as well as traditional authority structures? How if at all should the U.S. Government help foster such inclusiveness?
- To what extent if any does persistent corruption pose a challenge to the campaign on the ground or to an effective settlement process? What if the Afghan people do not view any of their apparent political choices as viable?
- Given the full panoply of U.S. national security interests and broader concerns, what should be the relative priority of Afghanistan, between now and 2014, and after 2014, for the U.S. government?

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