



In Brief:

Next Steps in the War in Afghanistan?

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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.

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 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

The Obama Administration has consistently articulated two 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 (name redacted), Susan Chesser, (name redacted), (name redacted), (name redacted), (name redacted), (name redacted), 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 surge 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 to pursue a formal process, Transition ("*inteqal*") in which responsibility for security would shift over time 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 decrease 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 added a new step to the formal Transition process, the so-called Milestone 2013: Afghans would assume lead responsibility for security throughout Afghanistan by mid-2013, and at that point, 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." At the NATO Chicago Summit, participants affirmed that the partnership with Afghanistan would continue beyond the conclusion of the current campaign. And the U.S.-Afghan Strategic

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.

Partnership Agreement (SPA), signed in May 2012—a statement of 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 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

While some basic parameters of U.S. Afghanistan policy appear to be set, particularly in the wake of the U.S. presidential elections, many issues concerning the extent of any further U.S. commitment and the forms it might take, between now and the end of 2014, and beyond 2014, remain unresolved. While troop levels and drawdown curves tend to steal the headlines, more fundamental still is the question of how coherently all the facets of U.S. government engagement in Afghanistan fit together in a single political strategy aimed at bringing the war to some resolution that will protect U.S. interests over the longer term. Simultaneously with U.S. decision-making, key allies and partners, and of course the government of Afghanistan and the Afghan people, continue to make choices that shape the realm of the possible.

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 retaining a residual troop presence after 2014.

During 2012, some basic U.S. policy parameters regarding future troop levels became 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. The President also stated that some U.S. troops may remain in Afghanistan after 2014 to pursue “two narrow security missions,” counterterrorism and training the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF).¹⁰ Any such presence would depend in part on the outcome of U.S.-Afghan

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>. These remarks echoed the description of possible post-2014 missions in the U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership Agreement, signed the following day, 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.-afghanistanspasignedtext.pdf>. Speaking at a press conference on November 29, 2012, Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta stated that any enduring U.S. presence in Afghanistan would have “three important missions”—counter- (continued...)

negotiations, launched in late 2012, designed to achieve a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) that would provide a legal basis for any post-2014 U.S. troop presence. Meanwhile, “surge recovery”—the return to 68,000 troops—was accomplished on time, and ISAF Commander General Allen has reportedly provided the President with recommendations regarding further drawdowns.¹¹

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 requirements for the campaign to successfully set conditions so that Afghans can craft a lasting political settlement. It may also be helpful to consider potential U.S. contributions in the broader context of other coalition contributions, and the capacity and capabilities of the ANSF.

Requirements have evolved over the past several years, as the campaign has progressed:

- In 2009, the McChrystal assessment introduced geographic prioritization of effort across the entire Afghan theater. Priority was given to population centers, commerce centers, and trade routes. 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.¹²
- In late 2012, commanders on the ground pointed to significant progress against the Taliban in the south but argued that it is not over there yet—a substantial Afghan army and police force will be required in order to consolidate the gains achieved, and they are likely to need some support from the coalition to be successful.
- 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 the major commerce route of 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

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terrorism; an advisory mission for Afghan forces; and providing enablers. See Joint Press Conference with Secretary Panetta and Minister Barak in the Pentagon Briefing Room, November 29, 2012, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5157>.

¹¹ ISAF placemat, December 3, 2012, available at <http://www.isaf.nato.int/troop-numbers-and-contributions/index.php>; and interviews with ISAF officials, 2012.

¹² General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, note 2, *supra*; and interviews with ISAF officials 2009, 2010, 2011.

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 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. Meanwhile, Afghan and coalition officials have noted with concern the interest of al Qaeda and other extremists in establishing a foothold in relatively remote upper Kunar and Nuristan provinces.¹³

In all of these facets of the fight, U.S. forces are part of broader efforts that also include other coalition forces, and Afghan forces, with the weight of responsibility shifting toward Afghan forces over time.

Coalition troop contributions are likely to diminish significantly in number in the near term while changing substantially in focus over the longer term. Key troop contributors to ISAF have signaled their intent to draw down or withdraw altogether ahead of the conclusion of the ISAF mission at the end of 2014.¹⁴ But NATO has announced the intention to establish a new “training, advising and assistance mission” in Afghanistan, after the conclusion of the ISAF mission, and planning efforts are reportedly underway to define and resource that mission.¹⁵

The ability of the ANSF to provide security in Afghanistan will depend on both their capacity and their capabilities. The ANSF were expected to reach their full target endstrength of 352,000 forces, including both army and police, by October 2012. While they fell slightly short of that goal, Afghan and ISAF officials express confidence that the targets will be reached in early 2013.¹⁶ But “352,000” is not regarded by most as a permanent solution, in large part due to the projected costs of sustaining a force that large. Instead, participants at the NATO Chicago Summit broadly agreed to maintain the peak level until approximately 2017, and then to begin a “gradual managed force reduction ... to a sustainable level,” with a working target of 228,500.¹⁷ That new target assumes both that funding will be available for that lower endstrength, and that Afghan decision-makers—no doubt with some suasion from the international community—will agree to the reductions.

Real future contributions by 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)

¹³ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011; and DOD, 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.

¹⁴ For example, France redeployed the last of its “battlespace-owning” forces, from Kapisa province, in late 2012. And the UK has indicated that in 2013, it will send home up to half of its remaining troops, drawing down from about 9,000 to 4,500. See Mohammad Abbas, “Thousands of British troops to quit Afghanistan in 2013,” Reuters, October 14, 2012; and “French combat troops withdraw from Afghan war,” Reuters, November 20, 2012.

¹⁵ 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; and interviews with ISAF officials, 2012.

¹⁶ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2012.

¹⁷ Participants further agreed that the international community would initially contribute the lion’s share of the estimated \$4.1 billion annual cost to sustain the force; and that the Afghan government would increasingly assume financial responsibility. 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.

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. Key developments in these arenas as of late 2012 included:

- The confidence of many Afghan National Army (ANA) commanders had grown markedly, catching up with their capabilities, and manifested in readiness to conduct largely independent operations at ever higher levels of command.¹⁸
- Afghan forces—particularly the army and the police—though they continued to harbor some institutional-cultural differences, increasingly reached out to each other, with little or no prompting from the coalition, to address challenges.¹⁹
- The ALP had grown to about 17,000 members, with few prospects of hitting their own target endstrength of 30,000 by the end of 2014. Coalition officials and some local Afghan officials continued to view the ALP as essential, local-level security providers, while many top ANSF officials continued to regard the ALP with skepticism, on the grounds that it is not a national force, that it may be subject to strong influence by local power-brokers, and that it may draw resources away from the formal ANSF. Where it was working best, local District Chiefs of Police, under the Ministry of Interior, as well as local councils of elders, had actively assumed ongoing responsibility for ALP activities and well-being.²⁰

In addition to campaign requirements, and the projected contributions of others, U.S. troop level debates might also sensibly consider the challenges of “retrograde”—bringing U.S. troops and equipment home again safely. Bringing the troops home from Afghanistan may prove far more complicated than from Iraq, given Afghanistan’s difficult terrain, its relative dearth of transportation infrastructure, and the lack of a “Kuwait” next door to pull back to. Retrograde is likely to impose significant drains on the time and attention of U.S. military leadership and forces, as the end of 2014 approaches.

Questions that might help inform the debates about the next steps for U.S. troop levels and campaign design 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

¹⁸ For example, the ANA 205th Corps, based in Kandahar provinces, conducted the Kalak Hode (“determined strike”) series of Corps-level operations in late 2012, including, at one point, sustaining itself for 16 days during operations in Zabul province. Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2012. Will and ability alone are not enough – the most critical question concerns the effects those efforts generate, which depend on many additional factors. But will and ability are widely regarded as prerequisites for achieving effects.

¹⁹ Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2012.

²⁰ Interviews with Afghan civilian officials, and ANSF and ISAF officials, 2012.

- 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 is a continued U.S. force presence after 2014—and with what force mix, with what missions, and for how long—necessary to help bolster ANSF ability?
 - To what extent if any might the presence or actions of U.S. forces in Afghanistan hinder security and stability by kindling antagonisms toward that presence among local Afghan populations?
 - How much U.S. leadership attention, troop efforts, and time, will be required for safe and effective retrograde?
 - 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 require over time? How much risk, and of what kinds, might incremental reductions in future ANSF endstrength introduce?
 - 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?
 - How if at all can Afghan fears of abandonment in the face of significant U.S. and coalition force drawdowns best be assuaged?
 - 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?
 - To what extent is the reintegration of former fighters—their decisions to lay down their arms and rejoin peaceful society—an important measure of campaign effectiveness?
 - To what extent if any do recent anti-Taliban movements—in which local residents in Ghazni, Laghman, and other provinces have taken up arms and stood up against Taliban incursions, without necessarily actively supporting the Afghan government—suggest progress in the campaign or bode well for 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 in NATO and U.S. government pledges to change the mission of coalition forces; and it is usually discussed, at the operational level, in terms of the concrete ways that coalition forces “pull back” as Afghans step forward. These strategic- and operational-level approaches to transition writ large are linked but not isomorphic, and dynamics in both arenas are constantly changing.

Formal Transition is sometimes poorly understood, in part because the concept 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 remarks to the January 2010 London Conference. He argued that within five years—by the end of 2014—Afghans would “take the lead in ensuring security and stability across the country.”²¹
- 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.²²
- By the NATO Chicago Summit in May 2012, an approach driven more by timelines than conditions had emerged.²³ The governments of Afghanistan and 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-2013.²⁴ Many observers agreed 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, in turn, talk about transition—which COMISAF General Allen has called “the linchpin of our strategy”²⁵—they generally mean not the strategic-level policy decisions 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,” used frequently at the strategic level, has engendered some confusion because it

²¹ See President Karzai, Inauguration Speech, November 19, 2009; and President Karzai, Opening Remarks, London Conference, January 28, 2010.

²² NATO Lisbon Summit Declaration, Lisbon, Portugal, November 20, 2010, available at http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_68828.htm?mode=pressrelease.

²³ 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 suffered barely if at all 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/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_topics/20120516_media_backgrounder_transition_en.pdf.

²⁴ 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.

²⁵ DOD News Briefing with General John Allen from the Pentagon, May 23, 2012, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5040>.

suggests a flip-of-the-switch change on a date certain. In fact, the relationship between Afghan and coalition forces has evolved continually as well as 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 was that partnering would jumpstart a partner force’s capabilities, including leadership, by “showing” not just “telling.” Coalition units would bolster their partners’ capabilities while participating directly in combined operations targeting the insurgencies.²⁶
- 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 took place unit-by-unit, and location-by-location.²⁷ Meanwhile, senior officials stressed that even as U.S. forces stepped back, they would remain “combat-capable.”²⁸
- The year 2012 witnessed the introduction to theater of security force assistance teams (SFATs)—small teams that embed with much larger Afghan units or headquarters, to provide advisory support as well as connectivity to coalition enablers. The teams vary in composition, focus, and even name depending on their locations within the Afghan system, and on the nationality (and sometimes the military service) of the troop contributor. By late 2012, the U.S. Army was moving to a model based on substituting Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) that include their own organic SFATs, for traditional, battlespace-owning Brigade Combat Teams that are supported by SFATs sourced out of other brigades. The much-smaller SFABs, with significantly reduced combat power, preclude by definition “doing it for them.”²⁹
- Also in 2012, according to Afghan and ISAF officials, the clear message that the balance of responsibility was shifting—and that “we’re going home”—was amplified by the final and very visible stages of the U.S. surge recovery and the accompanying consolidation of coalition forces at far fewer bases and outposts.³⁰

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

- What effects, exactly, are the new coalition advisory roles designed to achieve? How should the success of these efforts be measured? How much is enough?
- To what extent does increasingly stepping back and putting Afghan forces forward come at the expense of continuing to reduce the threats insurgents pose

²⁶ General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, and interviews with ISAF officials, 2009 and 2010.

²⁷ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011 and 2012.

²⁸ DOD News Briefing with General John Allen from the Pentagon, May 23, 2012, available at <http://www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=5040>.

²⁹ Interviews with ISAF and U.S. Army officials, 2012.

³⁰ Interviews with Afghan and ISAF officials, 2012.

to stability in Afghanistan? Or can increasingly capable ANSF backed up by coalition forces make roughly similar, or at any rate sufficient, 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? What would be the difference between such “educational” failure, and failure that poses a serious threat to the mission, to the confidence of the ANSF themselves, or to the confidence of the Afghan people in the ANSF?
- How appropriate—and clearly understood—are U.S. and coalition standards for stepping in when Afghan forces need or request help?
- What minimum essential level and mix of enablers—such as air, fires, ISR, and route clearance—does the ANSF need to give it sufficient capabilities, and confidence, to operate? How much of a continued contribution should the coalition make to providing such enablers? In each case, what is the transition plan to full Afghan reliance on their own organic enablers, and how much time will it take?
- What effects, exactly, might a post-2014 international military presence in Afghanistan be designed to achieve? How much support, over how much time, would be enough?

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 to craft realistic economic development plans. That intensified focus was catalyzed by one of the largest looming challenges—sustaining the ANSF.

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. All of these principles were underscored by the conclusions of the July 2012 Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan.³¹

³¹ See 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, available at http://eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/docs/2011_11_conclusions_bonn_en.pdf; and The Tokyo Declaration: Partnership for Self-Reliance in Afghanistan, from Transition to Transformation, from the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan, July 8, 2012, available at http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/afghanistan/tokyo_conference_2012/index.html/. For more explicitly U.S. government perspectives, 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, (continued...)

- 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 some technical assistance and supporting advisory efforts by Afghan experts. 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.”³²

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 maximize its potential—given its mineral resources and potential agricultural productivity—as a fiscally self-sufficient state?
- 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, how will the U.S. government be able to maintain sufficient leverage 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, is that longer timeline sufficient 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,

(...continued)

available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/2012.06.01u.s.-afghanistansassignedtext.pdf>.

³² 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.

given the significant financial pressures and competing demands that they are likely to face at home?

- 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? How rigorous are U.S. practitioners with themselves about what they can realistically “cover” or monitor from remote locations, as their own field presence is consolidated? How well-founded are current assumptions about the extent to which Afghan implementing partners will be able to mitigate any curtailing of the reach of U.S. practitioners? 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?

Governance

For many practitioners, an array of triggers has brought concerns about Afghan governance to the forefront. These include deep concerns about the conduct and outcome of the 2014 Afghan presidential elections; recognition of the challenges the Afghan judicial system has faced in addressing allegations of wrongdoing arising from the 2010 Kabul Bank crisis; and wide recognition among practitioners on the ground that the leverage of the international community is likely to diminish, including the particular fears of many military commanders that international civilian efforts are likely to be sharply curtailed. Yet those concerns are counter-balanced somewhat by what many observers characterize as diminishing appetite on the part of the international community to attempt to shape outcomes in this arena. Key dynamics in recent years include:

- 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 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, to the vested interests of the private sector. If the people viewed government officials as looking out only 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.³³
- Subsequently, some of the international community’s efforts to support good governance matured and bore fruit. At sub-national levels of governance, in some locations, 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.³⁴

³³ General Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF’s Initial Assessment, and interviews with ISAF officials, 2009 and 2010.

³⁴ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012.

- 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,” reflect a traditional form of power in Afghanistan and so might be a sufficient basis for stability in the Afghan context.³⁵
- 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 indirect terms, as helping Afghans build capacity, or better still, helping Afghan experts help other Afghans build capacity.³⁶
- The July 2012 Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan, aimed at refining the contours of support for development in Afghanistan during the Transformation decade, gave the Afghan government and the international community a potentially very powerful set of tools for strengthening good governance and countering corruption—a pointed set of “commitments” listed in the Mutual Accountability Framework, an annex to the Tokyo Declaration, that pave the way for conditioning future international assistance on Afghan fulfillment of those conditions.³⁷

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

³⁵ Interviews with U.S. Embassy Kabul and ISAF officials, 2011 and 2012.

³⁶ 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 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.-afghanistanspasignedtext.pdf>.

³⁷ See the Tokyo Declaration, Partnership for Self-Reliance in Afghanistan from Transition to Transformation, July 8, 2012, including Annex, Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, available at http://www.mofa.go.jp/region/middle_e/afghanistan/tokyo_conference_2012/index.html.

- 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?
- How can the international community most effectively speak with one voice to leverage the potential opportunities of the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework?
- 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 if any, and in what ways, should the international community support the further development of such voices?
- How critical are the 2014 Afghan presidential elections to the future development of Afghan governance? At a minimum, how good does the process, and the outcome, need to be, so that the Afghan people have basic confidence in the system, or at a bare minimum do not reject that system outright?

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.³⁸
- 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

³⁸ 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 inside Pakistan.³⁹
- 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 United States 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 incident in which, due to apparent miscommunications, U.S. fires killed Pakistani troops in Mohmand agency, led to some manifestations of Pakistani outrage.⁴⁰
 - As of late 2012, U.S. officials cautiously reported that some mil-to-mil engagement had resumed, including some tactical-level border coordination, and the conduct of nominally coordinated operations on both sides of the border. Yet U.S. commanders suggested that their planning assumptions have changed considerably, compared to three years earlier—little to no Pakistani action against Afghan insurgent safe havens is expected. Practitioners suggest that means a greater requirement 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. And it might also mean that the ANSF will need to be arrayed differently, with a greater focus on eastern Afghanistan, from the border to Kabul, than might otherwise have been planned.⁴¹

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. unmanned aerial strikes, be relied on to reduce the threat from Afghan insurgent safe havens inside Pakistan? How do the effects of such de-capitation strikes compare to those of clearing and holding operations? What other risks if any do such strikes introduce?
- How do Pakistani understandings regarding future U.S. and coalition force presence in Afghanistan affect the calculations and decision-making of the Pakistani government?
- 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

³⁹ Interviews with U.S., Afghan, Pakistani officials, 2009, 2010, 2011.

⁴⁰ 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>.

⁴¹ Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011 and 2012. And see General 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>.

closure of safe havens? If circumstances in Pakistan do not change, what would 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 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 within U.S. policy about how the war itself ends—that is, the “theory of victory” for the war in Afghanistan, or the logic that links current approaches to a desired endstate. One approach, particularly prevalent at the operational and tactical levels, emphasizes the gradual accretion of gains in Afghan civilian and security capability, together with an incrementally diminished insurgency. But military commanders are usually the first to add that such an approach is most likely to lead to real war termination only if that campaign is complemented by a multi-faceted political settlement process.⁴²

The second prevalent approach, also supported by U.S. policy, stresses achieving a negotiated settlement between the Afghan government and top insurgent leaders through a reconciliation process in which the United States aims to facilitate “Afghans talking with Afghans.” Efforts to date have, by all accounts, been stymied by the lack of substantive overlap, and thus the lack of bargaining space, between the major parties to the conflict. Yet, observers suggest, there may be an even more fundamental flaw in this logic: the Afghan people generally perceive their own government as corrupt and view it with suspicion, and they generally fear the Taliban. It is not obvious to many observers, therefore, how the Afghan people, arguably the ultimate arbiters of stability in Afghanistan, would respond to a deal brokered between these two entities.⁴³

Furthermore, some practitioners and observers suggest that these two approaches to war termination are at cross purposes. For example, if reconciliation were the primary modality for bringing the war to a close, that might suggest prosecuting the campaign on the ground differently—shaping the calculus of key insurgent leaders while preserving their networks intact so that, once a deal were struck, the leaders’ orders to those networks would be carried out. If the gradual accumulation of security and governance gains were the primary modality, then the whole

⁴² Interviews with ISAF officials, 2011 and 2012.

⁴³ Interviews with Administration officials and Afghan officials, 2011 and 2012.

concept of reconciliation might not be held out to the Taliban as a prospect until their strength was very significantly eroded.

An alternative to the current bifurcated approach, a growing chorus of practitioners and observers suggests, might be a single political strategy in which the campaign helps set conditions for an inclusive, highly participatory political settlement process that might ultimately achieve a formal reconciliation.

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?
- 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? Is the campaign intended to create conditions that may produce a political settlement? Is a well-crafted reconciliation intended to 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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