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## AFGHANISTAN: THE CHALLENGE OF 2014

NATO has finally set a sort of deadline on its combat operations in Afghanistan – year 2014. After that the primary focus of international assistance will be laid on “civilian” engagement in governance capacity building and reconstruction. But there is a question of whether bringing civilians out of the underground will become a magic panacea for all of the ills of today’s Afghanistan? After all - the very same civilian efforts have been present ever since the beginning of the current war. It is just that they have not really been successful. And unless some serious lessons are acknowledged and appropriate changes are pursued, there is very little hope that they will succeed now.

During 20th century, the international forces have repeatedly failed to facilitate the stabilization of Afghanistan when crucial opportunities arise. Having realized that it is impossible to dominate the country, the players involved have never had sufficient interest in stabilizing it. However, this ignorance has repeatedly caused the boomerang effect, making international actors re-engage later in much more costly ways for both - the international forces involved and Afghans as well.

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The US and Britain failed to support reforms of King Amanullah back in 1920s. The US repeated the same mistake same again in 1950s ignoring Prime Minister Daud's cooperation inquiries and his drive for the modernization of Afghanistan. As a result, Afghanistan drifted into Soviet influence. Later on, the international community failed to engage and effectively manage the post Soviet-Afghan war chaos in 1990s.

At the beginning of the current intervention, both Britain and the US pleaded not to leave Afghanistan in havoc again<sup>1</sup>. Can the international community afford to do the contrary?

In this essay it will be reflected on what went wrong with the previous civilian assistance attempts; the issues of insufficient strategic commitment, and lack of appropriate implementation structures, which resulted in over-centralization and under-coordination of reforms. Due to this fact and the deteriorating security situation the shift from military-dominated to purely-civilian international engagement bears high risks for the near future and resembles fleeing. The potential outcomes of actual fleeing are discussed in the second part of this essay. Therefore, the acknowledgment of previous mistakes and strategy oriented towards continued engagement in Afghanistan to balance security and governance development may appear to be the least costly way in the long-term perspective.

## Governance, reconstruction and development – what went wrong?

It seems that the understanding of what needs to be done to develop well functioning institutions and basic infrastructure for a successful exit strategy in Afghanistan has been in the air since the very beginning of the conflict. The same topics as today were discussed 4 years ago and even earlier. However, these tasks have never been clearly formulated and properly implemented.

If we take a look at the pillars of the ISAF mission statement – *security* has received the most of the attention from allies. But it cannot be sustainable without significant presence of international troops; *reconstruction and development* have brought some progress but at the cost of enormous waste of donors' funds; while strengthening *governance* has failed completely.

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<sup>1</sup> Analysis of last paragraph derived from Amin Saikhali „Modern Afghanistan, A History of Struggle and Survival”, I.B. Tauris&Co, 2006.

For various not so good reasons there has been too much focus on quick-fix solutions that have resulted in neglect of governance capacity development in Afghanistan, a weak legal system and almost non-existent rule of law<sup>2</sup>.

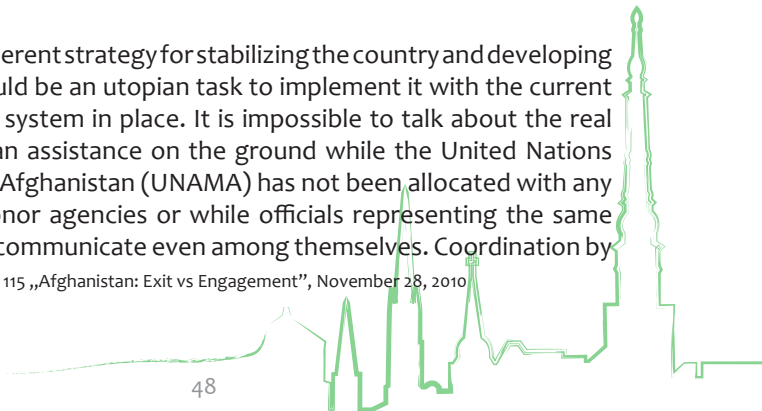
None will argue that the government cannot be based on the army and police alone – even if these forces are functioning well (which is hardly the case of Afghanistan). Government's legitimacy will depend on its ability to provide multiple services where justice and the rule of law are amongst the most urgent ones. And while currently Kabul is not capable of doing it, Taleban has been providing these justice services in its own distorted way long before and is doing so even now.

The inspiring stories and positive results presented to and by international community until now hardly match the reality on the ground. Measuring inputs rather than outputs has created an illusion of success. It provides a distorted picture to the decision makers and disillusion the clients – namely, Afghans, who do not see the promises and well-advertised huge expenditures materializing. Wishful thinking and the strategy of throwing money at the problem as soon as one arises, does not deliver the desired outcome. A more realistic and result-oriented approach is needed.

Failure to engage effectively – especially through civilian assistance projects – cannot be blamed on the corrupt and inefficient Afghan government alone. Understandably, donors and agencies love this excuse as it effectively diverts attention away from their own failures. However, a half or an even bigger part of the blame should be shared by the international community. An extremely complicated and non-transparent decision-making system in assistance projects and funding, where some more active parliamentarians from donor countries even get to chose their “pet” projects – has made a truly strategic approach to country building impossible. The result is an almost annual shift of priorities and dependence of contribution levels on donors' domestic considerations.

Even if there was a coherent strategy for stabilizing the country and developing its governance, it would be an utopian task to implement it with the current chaotic management system in place. It is impossible to talk about the real coordination of civilian assistance on the ground while the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has not been allocated with any real authority and donor agencies or while officials representing the same country often do not communicate even among themselves. Coordination by

<sup>2</sup> See Crisis Group Asia Report # 115 „Afghanistan: Exit vs Engagement”, November 28, 2010



no means is systemic and more often it rather depends on individual initiative and personal relations. At the end it does not look that much different from Afghan style patronage networks that donors at their capitals like to criticize so much.

Another aspect that hampers the development assistance and governance strengthening efforts is over reliance on centralized Kabul-oriented organizational structures of both – the Afghan government and donor agencies (governmental and non-governmental). Afghanistan, despite its 250-year-old history as a unified state, has never successfully pursued the path of strong and centralized rule. Instead, the most important skill for a successful leader has been the ability to balance various regional and tribal interests. Therefore, eventually, the fate of governments and their legitimacy is decided in regions, not in the capital.

Right now the main failures of governance are most obvious in the provinces and districts where executive branches are underfunded and incapable while the legislative ones are either insignificant or not present at district level at all. As a result, services remain undelivered and population is kept disillusioned about the capability of government in Kabul to make the difference. Nonetheless, many donor agencies and organizations still rely on the expertise of their comparatively populous Kabul headquarters instead of expanding their staff into provinces. Perhaps it is because the architects of such “Kabulized” country management came from the same capitals as most donor agencies.

At the same time, the personnel operating within the “virtual reality” of their Kabul fortresses often have a rather limited understanding of what is really going on in the country and most importantly – what the needs and results of the assistance programs under their administration are. To mask this failure the contributing NATO capitals are provided with meaningless statistics and half-truth about the real situation or progress on the ground. Not only it hampers their ability to develop and pursue a meaningful stabilization strategy, which would be based on both security and institution building; it also creates communication risks between the decision makers and their respective societies. Sooner or later people realize that there is no real progress and – rightfully so – start asking where the results against the huge costs of casualties and money are.

Facing these questions that are hard to answer without having to admit their own failures and acknowledging that the end of mission in Afghanistan, if to

be done properly, is still very far, an increasing number of countries choose another quick-fix solution – to leave.

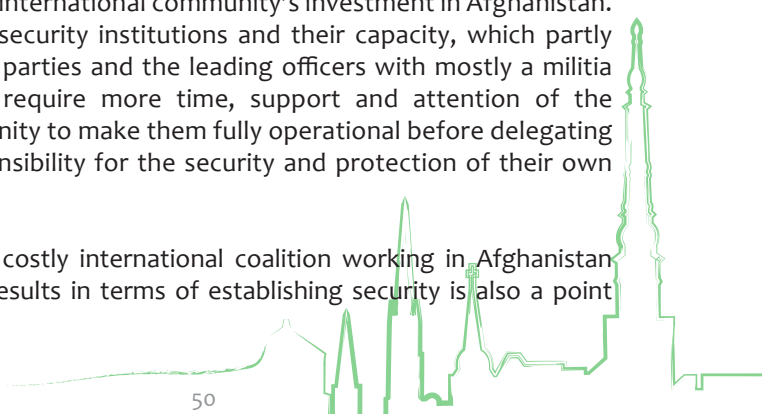
The expenses related to the civilian tasks of governance and development assistance are questioned more often especially by those countries that are struck by the economic crisis. When people are in need back home, it becomes harder to justify throwing money at strengthening abstract ideals in a country that is on the other side of the world. However, there are some much more practical considerations due to which countries often choose to engage in development assistance exercises. Afghanistan, if it reaches administrative and economic self-sustainability, will be a great partner to do business with. It used to be a vital transit crossroads due to its location and has a potential to regain this status – not to mention its enormous mineral wealth. Being there now and establishing contacts will open many business opportunities to any country – be it big or small.

For the time being, the civilian component alone will hardly be able to operate without any proper security provisions or if the country gets drawn into a widespread internal conflict. There are little grounds for hope – as described further in this paper – that this time the security situation will be much different by 2014. At least not before Taleban is truly weakened and ready to re-integrate or before self-sustainable Afghan security forces become operational.

## The challenge of the 2014

Given the context of worldwide economic crisis, the transition is indeed an important move, which is advantageous both to Afghans and the international allies, since the costly security forces of the international coalition engaged in Afghanistan are agreed to be reduced. However, as previously discussed, doing so without sufficient preparatory activities would risk the entire international community's investment in Afghanistan. The current Afghan security institutions and their capacity, which partly depends on political parties and the leading officers with mostly a militia background, would require more time, support and attention of the international community to make them fully operational before delegating them with full responsibility for the security and protection of their own nation and borders.

Meanwhile having a costly international coalition working in Afghanistan with no short-term results in terms of establishing security is also a point



of concern for the government of Afghanistan. Therefore, the following three areas need to be considered for the transition strategy, which would each require a different time input before the actual transition could start.

Firstly, it is the capacity building of security institutions (the army, police and secret services), which would include three main elements: skills, system and artillery alongside mobility equipment, including the aerial capacity. With the respect to the major security problems on its borders: drug trafficking, a high criminality rate, involvement of internal militias in political issues, etc., making country's security institutions fully functional will take much more time than the pre-set deadline of 2014. The adverse effects of malfunctioning capacity building process will pose risks to the sustainability and functionality of Afghanistan in long-term.

Secondly, it is important to build the effective mechanism for a step-by-step transfer of security responsibilities to the Afghan forces. Decisions on specific security actions and activities should not be rushed, as inadequate resources and lack of skills may lead to unpleasant consequences that would seriously affect the trust-building efforts within the country. Building nation's trust in the government is a difficult task that is extremely vulnerable - any mistake may be enough to shatter the confidence in the government people have just started to feel. And, again, it will take longer than 2014 before anyone will be able to claim that there is a right balance between the authority in Kabul and authority of Kabul in regions.

Thirdly, it is the dimension of civilian engagement that needs to be embedded into the coherent long-term development plans and programs. However there are issues that can undermine the sustainability and effectiveness of development projects and programs and therefore demand immediate attention of those involved. Currently, the implementation of reconstruction and development programs insufficiently involves government actors – both on central and local level. There is a certain lack of trust among international development agencies and Afghan government that threatens the sustainable development in Afghanistan. Thus, greater involvement of officials from respective Afghan ministries in management or consulting roles for reconstruction and development programs should be practiced. This would not only facilitate information exchange and on the job training for those involved, but above all aim at strengthening mutual trust and common understanding of goals by involved parties.

Lack of longer-term commitment for economic development and expansion is another issue that demands attention. Most of the time development projects are designed to deliver quick or medium term results and often at the cost of the long-term economic effects. And while they serve well as a part of the counterinsurgency strategy that engage locals in activities other than fighting, they neither contribute to the economic expansion nor increase public access to strategically crucial services.

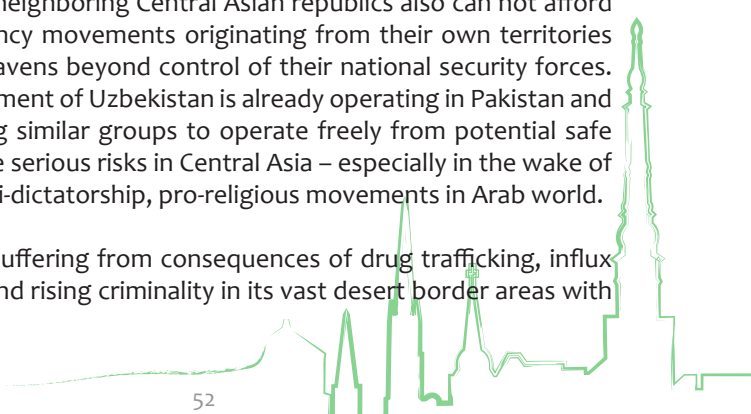
## Regional issues – not only source of problems, but also a potential solution

Currently the many insurgency related problems in Afghanistan are interlinked with events in its neighboring countries – and they do not stem only from usual scapegoat Pakistan. The agenda of reconciliation and reintegration has recently been a crucial topic in the context of Afghanistan. However, to succeed with reconciliation a regional approach reaching beyond the borders of Afghanistan is needed. Thus, the transition strategy needs to be built and viewed in the regional context. Countries all around Afghanistan have much to risk if current security project fails and Afghanistan once again becomes safe heaven for insurgent movements.

South of the Afghanistan and West part of Pakistan both are facing serious domestic political and insurgency problems. The “manufacturing” of the insurgents in religious centers functioning under the label of Islam is receiving widespread international support. Besides, there is no proper strategy in place to defeat the militias in Pakistan other than by supporting Pakistani forces by the US in order to fight them. Doubts about the honesty and success of the Pakistani forces are mainly grounded in Pakistan’s fear of India which is gradually building a closer partnership with Afghanistan.

In North, regimes of neighboring Central Asian republics also can not afford separatist or insurgency movements originating from their own territories to flourish in safe heavens beyond control of their national security forces. Namely Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan is already operating in Pakistan and Afghanistan. Allowing similar groups to operate freely from potential safe heavens would create serious risks in Central Asia – especially in the wake of recent exemplary anti-dictatorship, pro-religious movements in Arab world.

In West, Iran is also suffering from consequences of drug trafficking, influx of Afghan refugees and rising criminality in its vast desert border areas with



Afghanistan. Afghanistan plunging again into chaos is certainly not desired prospect for current regime of Iran. It does not want its neighbors to become an organizational platform for criminal activities as well as potential political problems within Iran's territory.

Given these risks and stakes regional players hold to avoid destabilization in Afghanistan, all of them – Iran, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan as well as India – should be involved in tailoring successful transition of security from ISAF to Afghans or even interim regional forces. However, the possibility of negotiating and implementing regional solutions with credible chance of success before current 2014 deadline does look overly optimistic.

## Conclusion

- Civilian assistance efforts, though desperately needed, have not achieved the desired goals in Afghanistan, especially in the crucially important fields of developing operational governance and justice system. Therefore, for the time being, these efforts may substitute the current military mission;
- Understanding that the eventual solution is based on achieving operational and basic service provision-capable governance in Afghanistan, the previous assistance set-backs must be reviewed and acknowledged. So that mistakes could be corrected and the existing useful practice applied. It would include straight talk to both the Afghan and donor societies in order to counter general skepticism;
- Straightforward and result-oriented strategies for governance and development assistance need to be formulated; the existing and upcoming resources need to be better coordinated; and a region-focused decentralized implementation approach adapted;
- Even after the transition to Afghan institutions, the presence of international forces will be required at a smaller scale to oversee their functioning, as well as the presence and political support of the international community for some more years before Afghanistan can be left standing alone with its own capabilities;
- Regional context of the stability and development of Afghanistan according the plan of 2014 is crucial and yet missing undermining the success of the current strategy.