



Reassessing the International Role in Afghanistan During the NATO Summit

By Aarthi Gunasekaran September 2, 2014

This brief contains a correction.

On September 4, world leaders and ministers from 60 nations will gather in Wales for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, or NATO, summit.¹ One item on their agenda will be particularly important: After 13 difficult years, the international community is preparing to mark the conclusion of NATO's International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, mission in Afghanistan.²

British Prime Minister David Cameron will host President Barack Obama, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, and French President François Hollande, among others. The NATO member state leaders will discuss the shape of future long-term international support for Afghanistan's people and for its shaky security and governance institutions, as NATO and the United States make plans to reduce their military footprint in the region. However, with the ongoing political uncertainty in Kabul, neither presidential candidates nor President Karzai will attend this important summit meeting. Afghanistan will be represented by Defense Minister Bimullah Khan Mohammadi.³

Afghanistan has seen real progress. Two decades ago, it was a desperate nation, stuck under Taliban rule while Al Qaeda flourished. Today, the country has achieved significant development—from broadened access to health care and education to expanded economic opportunity. Since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001, 8 million boys and girls have enrolled in school, a huge increase from the 900,000 boys enrolled under Taliban rule.⁴ Child mortality rates have declined by 50 percent, and maternal mortality rates by 80 percent.⁵ With the withdrawal of foreign forces, Afghanistan's stability will depend on how its leaders approach the upcoming economic, security, and political challenges. In May, President Obama rightly noted that the United States can and should play a supporting role to help Afghans sustain the gains made over the past 13 years.⁶

Nearly two months after a runoff election between leading candidates Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani, allegations of election fraud persist—undermining Afghanistan's progress toward a viable democracy and stability after decades of bloodshed and violence. Afghanistan has become embroiled in a self-inflicted political crisis,

despite efforts by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and the United Nations to resolve the outcome of its disputed presidential election results.⁷ The fragile and politically tenuous government continues to battle a nationwide Taliban insurgency, which only stands to gain from this political impasse.⁸

As the United States plans to withdraw its last troops by the end of 2016, the NATO summit kicks off a two-year period in which the international community will assess how to assist the key political, security, and economic transitions. Afghanistan's short- and long-term stability depends on the success or failure of these transitions and the roles Afghan leaders and the international community play in securing the gains of the past decade. This issue brief provides recommendations for effectively responding to these challenges.

The shadow of political dysfunction

Afghanistan's political transition will play out in the shadow of the current electoral crisis. In a nation known for its decades of fragmentation and chaos, the election process up to the June 14 run-off showed more unity and consensus than was expected. Unlike past elections, this one has been Afghan-led, with international actors taking supporting roles. Although Abdullah maintained a lead in the first round—with 45 percent of the votes to Ghani's 31 percent—the unofficial vote count in the run-off estimates that Ghani secured 4.2 million votes to Abdullah's 2.9 million—a difference of more than 1 million votes.⁹ This turn of events, along with substantial evidence from election observers that polls were rigged, has raised the specter of large-scale fraud.¹⁰ Abdullah, for his part, rejected the results and has threatened to withdraw from the election.¹¹

Secretary Kerry managed to negotiate with Abdullah and Ghani to support a full Independent Election Commission, or IEC, audit in accordance with a 16-point checklist agreed upon by the United Nations and the IEC.¹² Both candidates had differing interpretations of the vote invalidation criteria and what constitutes a nullified vote.¹³ Additionally, both parties agreed to a verbal power-sharing agreement upon the completion of the audit in which the losing candidate, or a representative of his choice, would serve under the president as the government's chief executive—a still-undefined post that would be elevated to prime minister in two years, pending approval from a Loya Jirga, a traditional Afghan grand assembly made of up community elders.¹⁴

Failure of the brokered audit process could further fragment the country along ethnic lines. While both Abdullah and Ghani have come out firmly against politics divided by ethnic fragmentation, the election's first-round results did split considerably along such affiliations, with Abdullah, who is half-Tajik and half-Pashtun, performing well among the Tajik and Hazara communities, and Ghani, a Pashtun, performing well among the Pashtun and Uzbek blocs.¹⁵ While both candidates remain steadfast against allowing ethnic undertones to permeate the election, a non-Pashtun leader has governed Afghanistan only twice in the past 250 years of monarchic rule—from the Taliban to current President Hamid Karzai.¹⁶

If the audit process and the unity government can hold and be viewed as legitimate, three fundamental problems still need to be addressed:

- The ambiguity of the new chief executive's role, and where that fits within the presidency structure.
- What the enforcement of the governance structure will be, as the Afghan judicial system remains structurally flawed and entrenched in corrupt practices. This leaves no clear arbitrator of the constitution.¹⁷
- How divisive the election results are. Ultimately, if ethnic allegiances weigh heavily toward the president over the chief executive, or vice versa, the winner will have trouble coalescing the country under a national mandate, which could result in an ethnically fragmented Afghanistan. This would create an environment ripe for the worst-case scenario of expanded civil war.

While the process unfolds, the United States and international community should:*

- Open dialogue with all parties on what the national unity government's legal framework will encompass and how the relationship between the executive and legislative branches will be managed during the two-year transition period.
- Encourage Afghan policymakers and lawmakers to clarify the responsibilities and portfolios of the roles rendered by the unity government agreement—whether the new arrangement is a step toward a parliamentary system, as Abdullah has long supported, or whether it upholds the strong executive presidency, as Ghani has preferred.¹⁸
- Support provincial-level debates, roundtables, and public delegates to facilitate the outreach of community elders. These leaders can explain to their communities the concrete ways in which development and governance can bolster elections as Afghanistan moves to administer provincial elections in 2015.*
- Work aggressively to pressure candidates and Afghan election commissioners to be transparent and to institutionalize fraud prevention and detection processes for future elections.

**Correction, September 2, 2014: This brief has been updated to reflect the fact that Afghan presidential candidates Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani will not be attending the NATO summit and to better reflect the role that community elders can play in the election process.*

Continued international commitment to security assistance

During the September NATO summit, leaders will review the progress of the mission of the International Security Assistance Force and agree on operational plans to launch the NATO-led Operation Resolute Support.¹⁹ This operation will train, advise, and support Afghan security forces after 2014; it is still contingent on whether the Afghan government signs the bilateral security agreement, or BSA. To date, President Karzai has refused to sign the BSA despite the overwhelming endorsement of the Loya Jirga convened last November that consisted of some 2,500 Afghan political, religious, and civil society leaders.²⁰ Abdullah and Ghani have each separately agreed to sign the BSA as their first order of business in order to maintain the U.S.-Afghanistan partnership and to ensure continued NATO and international support.²¹

This is the most concrete area in which Afghanistan's political gridlock is affecting its long-term future. International enthusiasm for continuing to pump resources into Afghanistan is shaky at best. Those who say that more resources will just feed waste and corruption point to the current political situation and the country's inability to sign a bilateral agreement with the United States—an agreement that is clearly in the Afghan national interest.

As of January 2014, ISAF totaled approximately 60,000 personnel, including 34,000 U.S. personnel.²² Confident that new Afghan leaders will sign the BSA, President Obama recently announced his intention to keep approximately 9,800 U.S. service members in Afghanistan after the end of the U.S. combat mission in December and to reduce this troop presence—which will be consolidated in Kabul and on Bagram Airfield—by half at the end of 2015. According to President Obama, by the end of 2016, the military role will be in line with normal embassy presence in Kabul, with a security assistance component.²³

Through the transition period and beyond, the primary goal of the U.S. mission in Afghanistan is to defeat Al Qaeda and its affiliates and to enhance Afghanistan's abilities to deter threats against its territorial integrity. While the United States moves away from its large-scale footprint in the region, the presence of the Al Qaeda network, predominantly along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, will continue to demand attention.²⁴ Although Al Qaeda's core leadership has been weakened, its broader network of affiliates and offshoots persists. Preventing the expansion of an Al Qaeda safe haven in the region is a key priority—one that requires Afghanistan to remain a viable state.

Troop levels have come to play an inordinate and unhelpful role in the Afghanistan debate, with the United States struggling to send clear messages to very different audiences. At home, President Obama seeks to assure Americans that in 2016—after 15 years—America's longest war will truly be over. This ending is supposed to signal to the Afghans that the United States will continue to support them but that they must step up to defend their own nation and people. Meanwhile, the Taliban and Al Qaeda are supposed to recognize that the United States is committed to not letting Afghanistan fall again and to continuing to target terrorists. These are inherently difficult signals to send;

they are contradictory by their nature. Furthermore, President Karzai's rejection of the BSA has made them impossible to manage in a coherent way, and President Obama perhaps waited too long—more than six months after President Karzai's refusal to sign the BSA—to announce any concrete details on residual troop numbers and dates. The plan he announced that leaves troop levels in the 8,000 to 10,000 range is designed to help Afghanistan sustain and improve the Afghan National Security Forces, or ANSF, enough to succeed in the security transition and manage the ongoing Taliban threat while the United States maintains its ability to conduct counterterrorism operations.²⁵

As the 2013 fighting season came to a close, Afghan and American officials believed the ANSF managed the majority of the security and counterinsurgency operations with reasonable effectiveness.²⁶ From the Loya Jirga in November 2013 to various large events such as the funeral of First Vice President Qasim Fahim and the Nowruz celebrations in Kabul, the ANSF successfully provided security, refined its operating procedures, and built confidence.²⁷ But the stress on the ANSF has been great, totaling more than 13,000 casualties since the start of the war in Afghanistan.²⁸ A significant proportion of these casualties have occurred over the past three years as the Afghan security forces have taken over the greater share of security responsibilities from their Western allies.

Afghan forces have made progress, but Afghan commanders have expressed concern that if the international community leaves, the ANSF will not be able to sustain the fight.²⁹ They are probably correct; Afghanistan's poor revenue collection is not sufficient to afford its estimated \$5 billion to \$6 billion security force of 373,400 troops, according to a Center for Naval Analyses report.³⁰ Continued commitment of U.S. and NATO support, in the form of security assistance and training and advising capacity beyond 2016, is the best way to help preserve the gains of more than a decade of war.

A long-term security assistance mission is sustainable and can enable the next Afghan government to address critical gaps in ANSF capacity and capability. According to outgoing ISAF Commander General Joseph F. Dunford Jr., the most important gaps are structural: a lack of multiyear budgeting; poor planning; poor aviation capabilities; poor intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance, or ISR; and weak personnel recruitment and retention.³¹ As Afghanistan continues to build on its successes, the Taliban will try to capitalize on the uncertainty surrounding the transition. Therefore, the United States and the international community should encourage the new Afghan president to:

- Sign the bilateral security agreement and conclude NATO's Status of the Force Agreement, or SOFA, as first points of priority.³² This will provide legal status for international actors to remain in a support-and-assist role in Afghanistan.
- Focus on unity of effort within the ANSF, particularly with the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police, and integrate all ANSF capabilities and the National Directorate for Security, or NDS. This will decrease overall vulnerabilities and increase effectiveness.

- Emphasize to the Afghan people that the shifting of ISAF and U.S.-led forces to an assist-and-support role does not mean disengagement.
- Create a more transparent and systemic approach to the ANSF recruiting and vetting process, especially in light of insider attacks on international personnel.³³
- Focus on building a sustainable Afghan National Army by addressing attrition rate issues and corrupt leaders at all levels of service.³⁴
- Use the NATO summit to advocate for and achieve ongoing U.S. and international commitments to existing initiatives, such as capacity-building efforts in military education programs and civilian emergency or disaster preparedness.

Security assistance to Afghanistan should remain robust beyond 2016. It should be supported by adequate U.S. capability to conduct urgent counterterrorism missions and to provide support to Afghan forces against extremist coalitions. Such assistance is not a continuation of the Afghan war but is instead a transition to help build a viable security structure in Afghanistan after decades of chaos and international dependence. A long-term commitment is the best way to normalize and sustain the U.S.-Afghan partnership without a large military presence.

The promise of economic opportunity

In 2012, foreign assistance constituted approximately 97 percent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product.³⁵ This is unsustainable and has enabled the entrenched corruption that now casts the greatest doubt on the global commitment to help Afghanistan over the long term.³⁶ The 2012 Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework outlined fiscal commitments to the Afghan government from foreign donors pledging \$16 billion dollars through 2015, with 20 percent contingent upon anti-corruption and good-governance measures.³⁷

However, corruption has continued unabated under President Karzai. The Afghan government consistently falls short of meeting its annual budget of \$7.5 billion, and according to governance watchdog groups, in the past eight years, nearly \$1 billion in direct aid has been siphoned off or diverted by Afghan political and business elite.³⁸ A Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction report states that corruption is entrenched in all levels of customs collection—a key revenue stream that could wean Afghanistan from some foreign dependency.³⁹ According to the report, in 2013, Afghanistan fell short of its 2014 revenue target by 20 percent.

Earlier this year, Congress moved to cut Afghan civilian aid by 50 percent, from \$2.29 billion to \$1.12 billion for fiscal year 2014.⁴⁰ The U.S. Agency for International Development, or USAID, has highlighted the risk of reducing aid too quickly and too drastically, but congressional support for cutting aid remains high due to the rampant corruption with its disbursement.⁴¹ This could become a downward spiral, leading other donor nations to cut aid too quickly. Stricter protocols for aid disbursement should be implemented to help a new Afghan government boost international confidence. Due to risks related to providing direct assistance to Afghan ministries, USAID recommended 333 “risk mitigation measures,” such as funds distributed on a reimbursement basis or the creation of separate bank accounts to create greater transparency in aid flows.⁴² However, Afghan ministries are only required to implement 24 of these measures before they receive funds.

Eventually, Afghanistan must move toward a self-sustaining economy. The next Afghan president will inherit a shrinking budget that risks thousands of public-sector jobs and jeopardizes development projects, from saffron cultivation, seen as a lucrative alternative to opium; to increased rural infrastructure, in order to boost small-enterprise development; to maternal health training and equipment.⁴³ These projects address key issues hindering upward mobility and seek to directly empower the Afghan people to tackle their immediate concerns of creating a sustainable livelihood and combating child mortality. The stakes for the next president are high: He must provide economic security, stable jobs, and a dependable energy and water supply. The underlying foundation for any of these is a strong rule of law and transparency. Therefore, Afghanistan’s next government should:

- Address job creation focused on tackling Afghanistan’s significant youth bulge and high unemployment rate. With 68 percent of the population younger than age 25, the opportunities and risks are great.⁴⁴
- Focus on passing a more specific and complete mining law, which has the potential to unlock as much as \$1 trillion in untapped mineral deposits and provide a much-needed, consistent legal framework and environment for foreign investors.⁴⁵ Without sufficient legal oversight, the potential to create widespread conflict and corruption will undermine any value added.
- Tap into unused water reserves and increase development projects to focus on hydroelectric power and systematic irrigation flow. This could address Afghanistan’s chronic water shortages and severe droughts, and hydropower could connect the energy and economic markets between South and Central Asia.
- Invest in roads with sound engineering and rural infrastructure. Tens of thousands of miles of roads and highways built by foreign donors have deteriorated due to overuse or have been shredded by improvised explosive devices, or IEDs.

- Expand on NATO's Afghan First guidelines to elevate Afghan companies as the primary suppliers of basic goods such as clothing to private security firms.⁴⁶ This will ensure that the billions of dollars in NATO contracts will go toward developing a healthy Afghan local economy and will break foreign contractor monopolies.
- Fold local sourcing and Afghan First-type policies into Operation Resolute Support to build local sourcing into the operational plan. This will help build the local economy and will put the Afghan people and their businesses at the forefront of the economic security transition.

Opportunities and averting the perfect storm

Afghanistan faces historic opportunities to make significant strides after a decade of global commitment. While far from perfect, the country is in a far better place than it was under Taliban rule. The Afghan people have defied Taliban threats, not once but twice, to go to the polls in large numbers and do their part to shape their nation's democracy.

Afghans are in the driver's seat as they prepare to complete the presidential election audit, to usher in a new government, and to begin planning for the exit of foreign troops. The recommendations discussed above address only a sampling of the myriad problems facing Afghanistan. It is now up to the country's duly elected leaders and the international community to make good on their commitments to tackle the remaining challenges.

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