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Framing the Post-2020 Afghan Environment

Thoughts and Recommendations

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Executive Summary

This research aims to augment the reader's strategic appreciation for the post-2020 environment in Afghanistan. As such, the authors consider this a "thought piece" versus a policy prescriptive decision briefing or white paper. The near-term goal is to inform the NATO Special Operations Component Command – Afghanistan/Special Operations Joint Task Force – Afghanistan (NSOCC-A/SOJTF-A) Commander and his staff on crucial variables that may prove consequential in the forthcoming development of a campaign design for the future utilization of Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Afghanistan, while also providing a collection of 'creative options' that could be injected into future SOF campaign plans in order to influence the aforementioned variables. For this analysis, the authors consciously present a holistic look at Afghanistan, accounting for variables and circumstances beyond SOJTF-A's authorities or sphere of influence. The expanded scope was purposefully chosen to present a comprehensive understanding of the environment in which SOJTF-A leadership employs the SOF enterprise.

The Current and Future Environments

Despite a history of frequent change and short-term planning, recent changes in the U.S. and Afghan national policies, as expressed in strategic documents and public dialogue, have reframed conditions in Afghanistan.¹ Additionally, the Taliban appears increasingly disunited, with individual elements vying for power, mainstreaming, radicalizing, or, in some cases, reconciling with the Afghan government. With cautious optimism, this research suggests that these changes present a potential window of opportunity in the conflict for the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) and its international partners to move the conflict forward from its current stalemate toward some form a conflict resolution, be it partial or total.

To aid in understanding Afghanistan's future conditions, the research team developed a range of six potential environments that Afghanistan may evolve toward: (1) failed state, (2) civil war, (3) stalemate or status quo, (4) moderate political instability, (5) emerging nation, and (6) prosperous nation. Currently, the team assesses Afghanistan to be in the 'stalemate' environment. By the end of 2020, based on the Resolute Support Mission's strategy and recent changes to U.S. Policy, the team anticipates Afghanistan to be trending towards 'moderate political instability.' It is likely that the northern and western regions of Afghanistan will pose

¹ Jim Garamone, "Nicholson Says Situation in Afghanistan has Fundamentally Changed," *DoD News*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1473636/nicholson-says-situation-in-afghanistan-has-fundamentally-changed/source/GovDelivery/>. This article outlines GEN Nicholson's argument as to what specifically has changed in Afghanistan to present a "unique moment" in the conflict.

more favorable environments (moderate political instability), while the eastern and southern regions remain closer to a stalemate environment and evolve more slowly.

To harness the complex set of factors influencing the Afghan environment, the team conceptually organized the Afghan environment into *considerations* (structural factors), *dependent variables* (items which friendly forces are attempting to affect/influence) and *independent variables* (items which friendly forces exercise direct control over). The considerations category includes (socio-cultural, geophysical, population trends, and time). The dependent variables include security, governance, economic development, external actors, and independent variables include U.S. policy and how “we” operate/partner. The team affirms the idea that influence operations and population perception, although not distinct variables, are crucial components that influence each dependent variable. In other words, the critical nexus between dependent variables that indicate not just *what* is done, but *how* it is branded and messaged. Subsequently, the team analyzed each overarching variable to understand the major components that affect it, which permitted the team to identify specific challenges in the future environment and ultimately resulted in the development of creative options capable of influencing the dependent variables.

Creative Solutions

Based on discussions in the field, academic research, policy analysis, the development of the future environments, and analysis of key variables and considerations in Afghanistan, the team developed a list of creative options for tackling problems across the spectrum of operations in Afghanistan. Based on the current needs of SOJTF-A, the team developed creative solutions as they relate to Taliban reconciliation, conflict prevention (reintegration), Afghan National Defense Security Forces (ANDSF) transformation, and influence operations via a coherent narrative. These specific solutions, and the challenges they aim to solve, are especially vital to ensuring long-term stability in Afghanistan.

Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan

Maintaining the Pressure: To create circumstances most conducive for negotiations, GIRoA must maintain military *and* social pressure on the Taliban while simultaneously providing viable, attractive, and feasible alternatives for those choosing to abandon the fight.

Incremental Settlement: Due to the somewhat fractured nature of the Taliban, GIRoA should apply a methodological and targeted approach to pressuring the Taliban in designated areas with greater susceptibility to government influence, while pursuing a simultaneous ‘bottom-up and top-down’ approach to reconciliation efforts. The ‘top-down’ approach refers to national level efforts to achieve a political settlement, while the ‘bottom-up’ approach refers to the village and district-level reconciliations, which develop more organically.

USSOF's Role in Shaping the Environment: Though conflict resolution will primarily be the result of political efforts, the military plays a critical role in shaping the environment to make a settlement possible. Beyond its obvious responsibility to apply pressure to the Taliban, the U.S. military's access to less secure areas, its established relationships with GIRoA officials, and its intelligence apparatus make it a valuable component in facilitating negotiations. USSOF will be essential in assisting Afghan forces in targeting Taliban elements to best set conditions for negotiations, as well as providing the resources necessary to maintain and advance territorial gains.

Conflict Prevention in Afghanistan

Short-Term Opportunity for Taliban Reintegration: A regionally oriented program—loosely based on a national model—that simultaneously supports local infrastructure development, provides immediate work opportunities to former Taliban, and teaches basic skills to foster future employment could counter extremism by providing opportunities to those who reconciled via employment in the short term and development of skills that former insurgents can leverage in the long term.

Long-Term Prevention of Extremism in Afghan Youth: A years-long pipeline that engages the youth population and leads to early adulthood, which is intended to assist in countering extremism while simultaneously fostering national identity, job opportunity, life skills, and hope for the future, would be a valuable tool in preventing extremism in young Afghans.

Political and Societal Inclusion: Providing economic opportunity through jobs programs, allowing former Taliban to return to their normal lives, and accepting that some former Taliban will serve in leadership roles within society, will assist in promoting political and societal inclusion, which are critical components to durable stability.

Implementation Needs to be Sustainable and Afghan-Led: Programs need to be cheap and self-sustaining. While U.S. military elements may be used to initially establish these programs, in the long-term, the Department of State and USAID should take the lead in providing U.S. support to these Afghan-led programs.

Transition of Roles in Afghanistan

Afghan Government Transition: The coalition needs to continue shifting ownership of the mission to its Afghan partners. Though the United States must continue to exert influence to serve U.S. national interests, failing to encourage Afghan independence and legitimate governance will result in Afghanistan remaining a donor state reliant upon foreign presence and support to function beyond the Resolute Support Mission.

Regional Transition: As the timeline moves toward 2020 and beyond, the Afghan government needs to set the conditions for greater regional cooperation external to Afghanistan. Initiatives leveraging the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF) can encourage partnerships

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and increase interoperability with partners to promote regional security and cooperation on other issues.

U.S. Transition: As the Coalition moves toward 2020 and beyond, the United States will need to shift the main effort to a Department of State solution with the military in a supporting role, such as with the presence of a Special Operations Command Forward (SOCFWD) battalion headquarters or participation in Sub-National Interagency Platforms (SNIPs).

Afghanistan Narrative and Influence Operations

The Coalition and GIRoA Need a Unified Strategic Narrative: The most significant problem with Coalition messaging is the perceived—if not actual—lack of a unified strategic narrative in Afghanistan. To further improve narrative and influence operations, the team recommends the following: (1) build a better story, (2) empower Afghan-led messaging, (3) leverage Islam and culture, (4) appeal to emotion, (5) back words with deeds, (6) continually assess messaging organizations, and (7) determine appropriate dissemination mechanisms.

Foment Uncertainty for Taliban Families in Pakistan: A military deception or psychological operation effort to foment uncertainty about the ability of Taliban members' families to remain in Pakistan may serve two purposes. First, it could sow doubt between the Taliban and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Second, it could put direct pressure on Taliban leaders to consider settlement or reconciliation more thoroughly as a viable alternative.

Increase Social Pressure on Taliban to Pursue Peace: This solution would create a suffocating degree of social pressure on a single Taliban leader to force reconciliation, from the government and population. This process could be repeated sequentially across the country to avoid overloading the reconciliation apparatus, or it could be simultaneously employed in different parts of Afghanistan.

Prepare the Battlefield: USSOF would never execute a kinetic operation without preparatory fires. Why not apply this paradigm to non-kinetic actions? To do this, the team suggests that before any new program or action is rolled out, a substantive messaging (public information) campaign first explains the purpose, function, goals, etc. of the program or action to set the stage and promote realistic expectations among the population.

ANATF Restructure and Building Trust: The down-sizing of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and rollout of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANATF) will require a considerable preparatory influence campaign to build an initial degree of trust and confidence in the new institution. In conjunction with the public messaging campaign, the Afghan National Army Special Forces (ANASF), who already enjoy a great deal of popular trust and confidence, could be employed as advisors to build ANATF capacity while they are being stood up and beginning initial operations to bolster the capability and credibility of the ANATF.

ASSF and Taliban Television Series: In terms of influence operations, GIRoA may consider initiating a radio, TV, or web-based show focuses on the Commandos or ANASF, that depicts

their story, and possibly the experience of Taliban fighters, to provide context to the ethical and moral challenges that both sides face, while weaving narratives into the storyline.

Characteristics Common to Any Solution

Based on the team's analysis, all solutions developed to address Afghan problems must incorporate five key characteristics:

1. Solutions should favor *localized bottom-up approaches* that recognize the diverse nature of Afghanistan and its internal regions and are tailored to meet those specific challenges. That said, bottom-up solutions will require sustained top-down support from the central government in terms of overt support, resources, and authority.
2. Solutions should be *Afghan-led and Afghan-implemented*, but with U.S. oversight that holds Afghans accountable for the results, as the environment is not resourced unconstrained. Solutions should not be U.S.-led with an Afghan face; the Afghans must take the initiative and assume responsibility for addressing their challenges with decreasing degrees of U.S. guidance and support. Similarly, the U.S. must permit and support Afghan initiative, while balancing the pursuit of core U.S. interests.
3. Solutions should be *durable and sustainable*, regarding both funding and changes in leadership or political priorities. Ideally, solutions would be affordable within the existing or expected Afghan government budget. At a minimum, the Afghan government must recognize the forthcoming decreases in donor support, and implement and sustain solutions without excessive U.S. or coalition funding commitments. Leveraging regional actors to share the financial burden may assist in defraying costs while increasing the prospect of success.
4. Solutions should be *resilient to changes in U.S. and Afghan leadership* (both military and civilian), policy, political personalities, and political priorities. Solutions focused on solving widely recognized core issues will enjoy durability; while ancillary efforts or pet projects will be the most susceptible to defunding or simply being forgotten during changes in leadership, fiscal constraint, or in light of an emerging international crisis.
5. Finally, once developed, solutions should be implemented in areas that will support their success. *Proofs of concept* or '*confidence targets*' should be used to enhance the resiliency of solutions before full-scale implementation. Attempting to implement nascent solutions in Taliban-controlled areas (vice Taliban-contested), or on a national scale, will most likely lead to failure.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to augment the reader's strategic appreciation for the post-2020 environment in Afghanistan. As such, the authors consider this a "thought piece" versus a policy prescriptive decision briefing or white paper. The near-term goal is to inform the NATO Special Operations Component Command – Afghanistan/Special Operations Joint Task Force – Afghanistan (NSOCC-A/SOJTF-A) Commander and his staff on crucial variables that may prove consequential in the forthcoming development of a campaign design for the future utilization of Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Afghanistan. For this analysis, the authors consciously present a holistic look of Afghanistan, accounting for variables and circumstances beyond SOJTF-A's authorities or sphere of influence. The expanded scope was purposefully chosen to present a comprehensive understanding of the environment in which SOJTF-A leadership employs the SOF enterprise.

To understand Afghanistan's future challenges, this study examines the current Afghan environment (geo-physical, economic, diplomatic, security, military, and socio-cultural), as well as U.S. Government and the Government of the Republic of Afghanistan's (GIRoA) policies and strategies to form an approximation of the range of environments that Afghanistan may potentially evolve (or devolve) toward. Considering this range of environments, the research team offers a conjecture of what the post-2020 environment may look like. Based on this prediction and its associated assumptions, this research lists a series of challenges and opportunities that, if sufficiently addressed or influenced, will push Afghanistan and its subordinate parts on a positive trajectory toward outcomes desired by the United States. Although the primary purpose of the document is to provide context and considerations for the future, the team offers some creative solutions to the identified challenges, as well as proposes a set of considerations that should be present in any efforts to implement future solutions. Finally, this paper represents a much larger body of research. The attached appendices augment each of this paper's findings, considerations, and creative solutions with greater detail and context.

Background

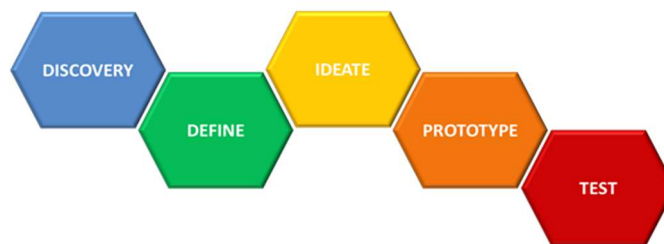
In September 2017, at the request of the SOJTF-A Commanding General, the Naval Postgraduate School's (NPS) Department of Defense Analysis convened a team of officers studying irregular warfare to consider the post-2020 utilization of Special Operations Forces (SOF) in Afghanistan. The study intended to offer considerations that would assist the current and future commander and SOJTF-A planners in understanding the post-2020 environment and allow the command to initiate steps necessary to posture SOF appropriately for anticipated future

challenges. The SOJTF-A Commanding General’s guidance was two-fold. First, the team should conduct an analytically rigorous study unconstrained by existing military planning processes. The commander stated that he did not want a plan for Afghanistan but a “design.” His instructions gave the study team a wide scope, specifically stating that he had great confidence in his organic military planning capability and that the study team should explore the challenge of Afghanistan using academic methods. Second, the Commanding General directed three specific outputs: (1) a set of considerations that SOJTF-A planners could leverage to develop future SOF campaign plans, (2) concepts for creative solutions addressing the complex challenges facing SOJTF-A that could be incorporated into a larger campaign plan, and (3) a narrative that explained continued U.S. presence in Afghanistan beyond 2020.

Approach and Methodology: Design Thinking

To satisfy this guidance, the team leveraged elements of “design thinking” with support from NPS experts in the design field. Design thinking, developed at Stanford University’s Hasso Planter Institute of Design, is a process that employs collaborative discussion to incorporate a vast array of viewpoints and ideas which are synthesized into a coherent construct for the purpose of developing innovative solutions to complex problems via an iterative cycle of discovery, definition, ideation, prototyping, testing, and refinement. Figure 1 depicts this process. Design thinking employs a multi-disciplinary approach combining creative and analytical processes.

Figure 1. The Design Thinking Process



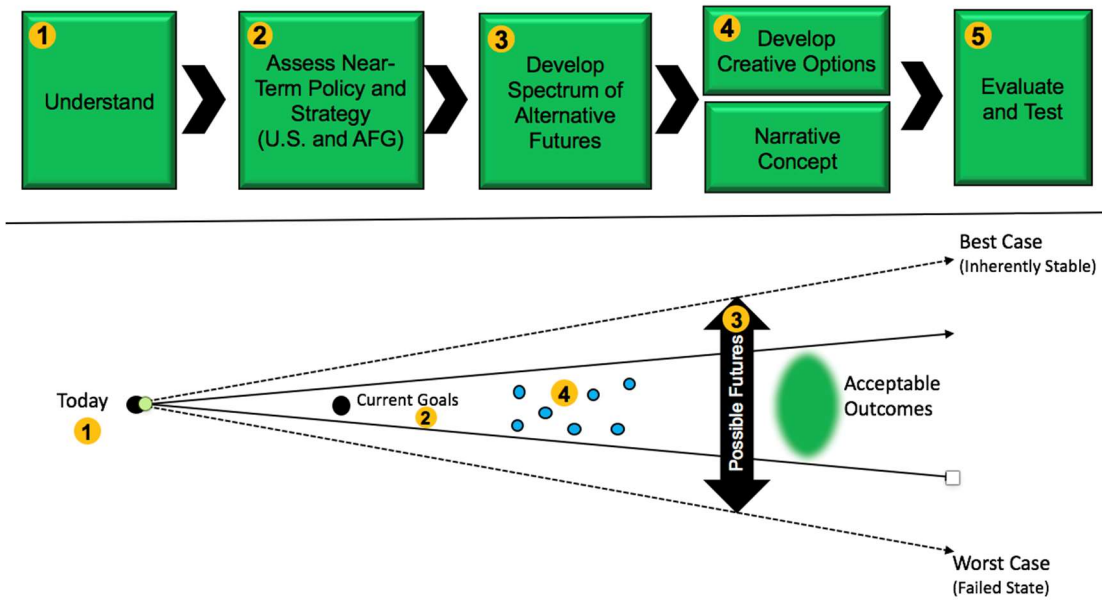
Note: Author modified from “The Design Thinking Process,” *Stanford University*, <http://web.stanford.edu/group/cilab/cgi-bin/redesigningtheater/the-design-thinking-process/>.

The team focused its initial efforts in the discovery phase to gain an understanding of the strategic problem set in Afghanistan. This included conducting in-country interviews with leadership and staff members from SOJTF-A, the NATO RESOLUTE SUPPORT MISSION (RSM) Headquarters, and U.S. Embassy Kabul. After returning to the United States, the study team completed dozens of additional discussions with subject matter experts on Afghanistan and the region, including Dr. Hamdullah Mohib (Afghanistan’s ambassador to the United States), Michael Lumpkin (former Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations/ Low Intensity

Conflict and Undersecretary of Defense for Policy), Laurel Miller (former acting U.S. Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan), and Dr. Thomas Barfield (a leading U.S. anthropologist of Afghanistan). In total, the group conducted 61 discussions with subject matter experts.

Based on findings from the discovery phase, the team developed an understanding of the current environment (step one in Figure 2 below). Next, the team assessed U.S. and Afghan policy, as well as the interests of six regional actors (Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China, India, and, broadly the Central Asian States) to understand each actor’s near-term strategic goals vis à vis Afghanistan. In combination, these assessments provided a tentative ‘anchor point’ into the future environment (Step 2), from which the team developed a range of six possible post-2020 environments toward which Afghanistan may evolve (Step 3). After examining the current and tentative future environments, the team organized conditions within the environment into a set of variables which are assessed to affect the future trajectory of Afghanistan, which are described later. At this point, the team bifurcated its efforts. One portion of the team focused on developing creative options to influence the previously identified environmental variables, while the remaining portion considered the strategic narrative for Afghanistan and developed a set of talking points regarding a continued (or discontinued) military presence in Afghanistan to support military leaders during future engagements with civilian policymakers (Step 4). The final phase of the framework evaluated and tested the creative options, which leveraged red-teaming exercises with Afghan experts within NPS, the RAND Corporation, and the Army War College (Step 5).

Figure 2. Analytical Approach and Methodology



Note: The bottom half of the figure indicates how far into the future each step is scoped for analysis. For example, step 3 assesses a wide range of possible futures while step 4 addresses creative options designed for the nearer term.

The Current Environment

The characteristics of this design challenge proved immensely complex. The war has seen three U.S. presidential administrations, and the U.S. military has been in continual active combat within the country for over 16 years, making this the longest war in U.S. history. Efforts to produce success in the form of enforced peace and a functioning government have yet to succeed. The design challenge for the study team can best be described as a “wicked problem.”² In other words, the problem is so convoluted that there is little agreement at any level of government or academia about the actual definition of the problem in the first place, much less agreement about its solution. Based on the complexity of the problem, the team assessed a broad view of the environment to help distinguish the areas which United States Special Operations Forces (USSOF) can affect. After analysis of discussions, policy documentation, and the vast literature gathered during the discovery phase of the project, the team understood the central obstacle to achieving U.S. interests and establishing enduring, relative stability in Afghanistan is the inability to effectively communicate, coordinate, implement, and sustain a consistent, long-term strategic objective(s) for Afghanistan among the U.S., coalition, and Afghan partners. Instead of fighting one sixteen year-long war, the United States and its allies have fought sixteen one-year wars. In the future, the coalition must establish and effectively communicate long-term objectives for Afghanistan and the region.

To date, the U.S. strategic direction – including both policy and strategy – in Afghanistan exemplifies what the “systems thinking” field identifies as the “fixes that backfire” archetype. Put another way, the United States and coalition partners have applied “Band-Aid” fixes to problems and challenges as they present themselves. This has resulted in short-term solutions that ultimately failed to achieve desired outcomes due to unaddressed, unanticipated factors that caused the problem to recur or evolve. This shortcoming prevents unified action by the United States, Afghanistan, and international partners. Additionally, the inability to effectively explain and justify why the coalition is in Afghanistan curtails the provision of resources (personnel, funding, time) and support from domestic and international audiences. Finally, the problem is exacerbated by the adoption of ‘foreign-conceived’ plans and strategies by the United States and coalition forces. These initiatives do not recognize structural factors inherent to Afghan society, such as the adoption of a centralized democracy in a traditionally acephalous society, the inherent limitations that terrain and lack of infrastructure pose to centralized government control, and the fact that Pakistan and Iran prefer relative instability in Afghanistan. Although these

² A “wicked problem” is an issue that cannot be solved by traditional processes, can be difficult to define, and may not have a solution. (John C. Camillus, “Strategy as a Wicked Problem,” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2008, accessed May 7, 2018, <https://hbr.org/2008/05/strategy-as-a-wicked-problem>.)

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foreign plans created change, and sometimes even progress toward the desired outcome, none have yet to result in successfully achieving U.S. objectives.

Major Themes from Discussions

The following is a brief synopsis of the major themes captured during the 61 discussions with leadership and staff at SOJTF-A, RSM Headquarters, and U.S. Embassy Kabul from November 2017 – January 2018 regarding the future prognosis for Afghanistan. These themes set a foundation for the team’s initial frame of reference and subsequent research areas.

- Non-military factors, including economic growth, youth employment, urbanization, population growth, and societal factors were the most recurring themes of the discussions.
- Many discussants expressed concern about priorities and policies, the frequency with which they change and their unpredictable nature.
- There is a widespread concern that the United States is building up institutions with little to no concern for GIRoA’s capability or capacity to sustain them (and without regard to whether Afghans have shown any cultural interest to nurture such institutions).
- The United States has difficulty balancing empowering Afghans through building partner capacity versus ensuring mission success of the counterterrorism (CT) mission.
- Foreign influence was listed as a major concern across discussions, specifically, the role that Pakistan and Iran play in supporting the Taliban, as well as Pakistan’s critical role in any reconciliation or political settlement.
- Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF), specifically the Afghan Commandos but also the Special Police under the General Command Police Special Unit (GCPSU), were overwhelmingly cited as successful. All discussants who spoke about the RSM plan for the doubling the size of this force composition expressed concerns of the quality of the future force.
- Several discussants expressed concern over the availability of resources for:
 - RSM in general.
 - Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFABs) taking resources that would be available to U.S. and Afghan SOF while simultaneously requiring additional manpower to provide for their force protection in garrison and on operations.
 - Continued development and sustainment of Afghan Special Mission Wing (SMW) transport, surveillance, and ground attack capabilities.
- Discussants did not hold consensus regarding U.S., coalition, or GIRoA capabilities or efforts to counter Taliban Influence Operations and propaganda, but most agreed this is a capability gap.
- Key NATO partners anticipate remaining in the country post-RSM (UK, France, Norway, etc.); however, individual countries’ interests may not align military and political

activities into a coordinated or synchronized effort that coherently supports either the achievement of U.S. interests in Afghanistan or that of GIRoA.

- There is a tension between those at the higher leadership level who have a sense of optimism, encouraged by the progress they are witnessing, juxtaposed with those at lower levels who are not seeing the sufficient progress needed to say that objectives are being met.

U.S. and Afghan Policy and Strategy Assessment

To analyze the overlap and disparity between Afghan and U.S. strategy and policy, the team examined U.S. and Afghan policy and strategy documents to draw out the main points, critiques, questions and potential ideas generated from the strategic guidance.³ These documents and supporting speeches present a wide range of themes and interests, which have oscillated in importance and specific detail over time. These themes include security, economic and social development, governance (provision of services, constitutional rights, and democracy), Afghan self-reliance, controlling corruption, reconciliation, and regional cooperation.

Most recently, under the Trump administration, the priority efforts appear to push for Afghan self-reliance and legitimate governance, a ‘holistic’ regional approach, sustainability, reconciliation (conflict resolution and decreasing political fracturing), and denying a terrorist safe haven. According to the 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS), the United States wants a “stable and self-sustaining Afghanistan.”⁴ In broad security terms, this means a government that enjoys a relative degree of trust and confidence from the population, with security forces that are capable of maintaining internal order and denying safe haven to international terrorist organizations within its borders. The first step in maintaining internal order is establishing it, which begins with finding a resolution to the conflict with the Taliban. Regarding the international terrorist threat, the United States also desires a reliable counterterrorism partner, which provides access to the Central Asian region for the pursuit of U.S. CT and counterproliferation objectives. According to the NSS, the United States seeks a “presence in the region, proportionate to threats to the homeland and our allies.” It also seeks to balance the influence of regional actors. The NSS calls for Pakistan to stop its destabilizing behavior toward Afghanistan and for the Central Asian States to increase their resilience “against domination from rival powers.”

³ These documents included Department of State’s 2015 Integrated Country Strategy; GEN John Nicholson’s “What Winning Looks Like,” R4+S memorandum, along with Defense Secretary James Mattis’ and GEN Joseph Dunford’s testimony before Congress (2017); Report to Congress on “Enhancing Stability and Security in Afghanistan” (2017); Current National Security Strategy and open source reports regarding the South Asia Strategy; Bilateral Security Agreement (2014), Strategic Partnership Agreement (2012) and open source reporting on the Kabul Compact, signed in 2017; and the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) and the Afghan Ambassador Dr. Mohib’s comments during his January 2018 visit to NPS.

⁴ Donald Trump, *National Security Strategy*, (Washington, D.C.: White House, 2017), 50.

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From the documents, a contrast emerged between U.S. and Afghan long-term goals for Afghanistan. U.S. security goals focus mainly on counterterrorism—denying safe havens in Afghanistan to prevent terror attacks on the homeland and abroad—and supporting the ANDSF operations intended to buy time and space for central government reforms to take hold as a means to increase GIRoA’s legitimacy among all Afghans. For the United States, the purpose of long-term economic and social development is to degrade the threat that an unstable or failed-Afghanistan may present while simultaneously decreasing the cost of a continued U.S. military presence. For GIRoA, the order of priorities appears to be the inverse.

Although the Afghan Government recognizes counterterrorism, security, and conflict resolution as necessary, it perceives the greatest threats to its survival to be internal political strife and its ability to deliver services and provide economic opportunity to the population, which in turn produces—or diminishes—the degree of legitimacy and durable stability. The Afghan National Peace and Development Framework, also known as President Ashraf Ghani’s 4-year plan, introduces a vision and broad strategy for these objectives. The document frames 2017 as a turning point for Afghanistan, toward hope and prosperity following four decades of conflict. The framework also emphasizes the need for a sustainable budget that is not reliant on donor support, yet simultaneously asks donors for patience and cautions that transformation is a long and winding road. In terms of governance, the framework advocates for political unity, promises to curtail corruption and increase accountability, and reiterates the government’s duty to provide services and protect citizens’ constitutional rights (empower, educate, and employ). Economically, the Afghan Government intends to focus efforts on mining, agriculture, and regional trade, as well as investing in infrastructure, investing in human capital including through Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) programs, and integrating women into society more fully. Standing in the way of these initiatives is security. President Ghani’s plan discusses the security nexus between conflict, criminality, corruption, and unemployment.

Near-term Policy Assessment – A Potential Window of Opportunity

Despite this research’s indictment of past U.S. policy and strategy in Afghanistan, recent changes in the U.S. and Afghan national policies, as expressed in strategic documents and public dialogue, have reframed conditions in Afghanistan.⁵ Additionally, the Taliban appears increasingly disunited, with individual elements vying for power, mainstreaming, radicalizing, or, in some cases, reconciling with the Afghan Government. With cautious optimism, this research suggests that these changes present a potential window of opportunity in the conflict for

⁵ Jim Garamone, “Nicholson Says Situation in Afghanistan has Fundamentally Changed,” *DoD News*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1473636/nicholson-says-situation-in-afghanistan-has-fundamentally-changed/source/GovDelivery/>. This article outlines GEN Nicholson’s argument as to what specifically has changed in Afghanistan to present a “unique moment” in the conflict.

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GIRoA and its international partners to move the conflict forward from its current stalemate toward some form of conflict resolution, be it partial or total.

The most significant policy change is that Afghan and U.S. national leadership have indicated that the acceptable outcomes in Afghanistan are no longer binary (win or lose). There is now a third option, draw, where both sides accommodate one another, and neither side wins outright. GIRoA, the United States, and partner nations of the coalition, as well as the Taliban, publicly appear willing to make compromises in their respective negotiating positions to allow a resolution and initiate the process of rebuilding the country and reforming local and national governance. The fact that political inclusion of the Taliban and constitutional reform are now open to negotiation is significant, as it shows that the Taliban's and GIRoA's negotiating positions are closer than ever before, and GIRoA's position is no longer intransigent.

The other significant U.S. policy changes relate to commitment, consistency, regional strategy, and troop strength. The transition from a time-based to a conditions-based commitment provides greater predictability for the Afghan Government, permitting longer-term planning, while simultaneously forcing the Taliban to reconsider its strategic calculus. The fact that Taliban leadership can no longer depend on the withdrawal of U.S. and coalition support for GIRoA in the very near future undermines their narrative that victory against the occupiers is only a matter of time. To be clear, although the U.S. recommitment is open-ended, it is resource constrained. It is certainly limited by personnel, material, and financial constraints intended to mitigate future coalition mission creep and implicitly increase pressure on GIRoA to continue implementing reforms. The United States and its Afghan partners must deliver results, or at least tangible progress, to maintain funding and support. A corollary to commitment is consistency. As previously discussed, over the course of the war, the United States has employed a set of inconsistent, short-term strategies; however, in contrast to the past, GEN Nicholson's "What Winning Looks Like in Afghanistan" lays out a holistic strategy for U.S. involvement in Afghanistan well into the next decade. Part of this holistic strategy is taking a regional approach. President Trump's South Asia Strategy placed significant diplomatic and economic pressure on Pakistan in hopes it will pressure the Taliban, whose leadership enjoys safe haven within Pakistan, to the negotiating table. The final consideration is the "right-sizing" of troop numbers in Afghanistan. Although the initial withdrawal of troops in 2015 resulted in major setbacks, including loss of territory previously won against the Taliban, it forced the United States to empower Afghans and prioritize a "with and through" approach, which is more likely to improve Afghan capacity in the long-term. Since the low point of nearly 8,500 troops, the Department of Defense and the White House have reached a compromise at approximately 14,000 troops, which provide the appropriate level of advisory support, air power, and other critical functions to support the Afghans.⁶

⁶ Garamone, "Nicholson Says Situation in Afghanistan has Fundamentally Changed."

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On the Afghan side, President Ghani and his government appear poised to lead. The coalition must allow them, by offering the appropriate degree of advisory support and oversight and applying diplomatic influence upon regional states, while maintaining the pursuit of core unilateral U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region. President Ghani is pursuing his strategy by (1) laying out the peace framework in the Kabul Process, (2) discussing a long-term development plan in the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework and the Citizen's Charter Project, and (3) attempting to execute reform and limit excessive corruption via the "200 Benchmarks" and various other initiatives. President Ghani appears to be setting the foundation for mobilizing the population to support the government, which will permit balanced development, reform, and, ultimately, durable stability. Neutralizing the insurgency – i.e., the Kabul Process – appears to be well underway, with some evidence of success. The Hekmatyar deal provided the test case for political settlement. There is also evidence of localized reconciliation and groups splintering from the Taliban. Finally, President Ghani's most recent peace overture appeared to have an expedited timeline and placed the opportunity for peace within the Taliban's discretion, leaving the Taliban subject to increasing social and political pressures. Relying on open source information, it is unclear if the peace overture was a coordinated move with the United States or a unilateral decision from President Ghani to seize a perceived opportunity.

Finally, the Taliban that GIRoA and its partners face today is not the same organization it was in 2001. Intelligence and research indicate the Taliban has become increasingly fractured while the organization is fatigued from the relentless pressure of the Afghan government and its coalition partners.⁷ The current emir, Malawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, is struggling to lead the Taliban as a unified organization and exert authority over regional elements, such as the Mansour network, that are internally vying for power.⁸ With the rising intervention of Iran and Russia through the provision of money and arms to willing Taliban factions, elements are becoming increasingly independent, minimizing their reliance on funds centrally dispersed by the Taliban leadership.⁹ The acceptance of support by some factions only widens the rift with those unwilling to cooperate with Afghanistan's historical adversaries. Varying ideologies continue to be a source of internal conflict as some elements adopt more mainstream and moderate beliefs, while other disillusioned members radicalize further, some joining the ranks of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – Khorasan (ISIS-K).¹⁰ Though the Taliban may have existed

⁷ Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban after a Decade of War." *Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies*, January 2017, p. 5.; Matthew Dupee, "Red on Red: Analyzing Afghanistan's Intra-Insurgency Violence," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, January 2018, <https://ctc.usma.edu/red-on-red-analyzing-afghanistans-intra-insurgency-violence/>;

⁸ Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Ready for Peace?" p. 5.

⁹ Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Ready for Peace?" p. 8.

¹⁰ Ben Brimelow, "ISIS Wants to Be as Dangerous as the Taliban - but It's Not Even Close," *Business Insider*, February 11, 2018. <http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-taliban-afghanistan-terrorism-2018-2>.

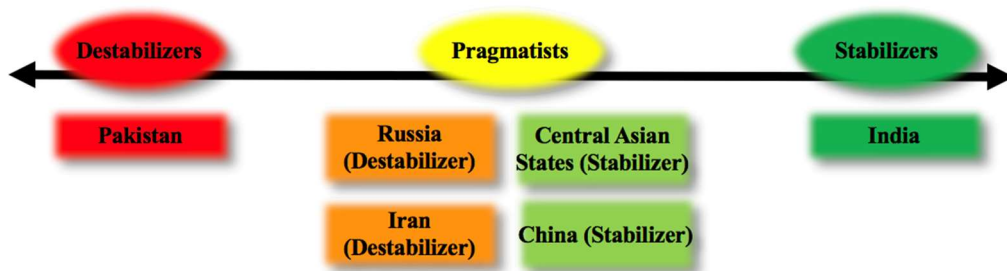
in such a state for years and continues to be a significant enemy to GIROA, conditions have arguably changed for both the Taliban and the government, possibly creating an opportunity for the initial steps of conflict resolution.

External Actors

Afghanistan continues to draw the attention of the international community, particularly since the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom. The goals of the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan have evolved over the years due to geopolitical complications, yet the U.S. commitment remains. Beyond the coalition, the broader international community continues to focus on Afghanistan for various reasons, albeit often from the sidelines. These reasons stem from upholding NATO’s Article V mandate, pursuing terrorist networks, combating illegal trade, and suppressing the large flow of immigrants coming from Afghanistan. In other words, instability, extremism, illicit drug trade, and refugees — all emanating from Afghanistan — have the potential to become international problems. Thus, Afghanistan continues to draw worldwide attention.

For SOJTF-A, the options for influence on a global scale are limited. However, success in Afghanistan, and broadcasting Afghan-led successes, will continue to draw international attention. The more successful and stable Afghanistan is perceived to be, the more support it will draw. Yet, the greatest considerations regarding external influences come from the region surrounding Afghanistan. Specifically, Russia, Iran, China, the CAS, Pakistan, and India are the key states to consider when examining external influences in Afghanistan, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3. External Influencers in Afghanistan



Russia and Iran are pragmatic destabilizers who are willing to generate instability in Afghanistan, but not enough to see an entirely failed state. China and the CAS, pragmatic stabilizers, are willing to push Afghanistan toward stability, but only slightly and with their own self-interests in mind. Pakistan, the spoiler, is looking to destabilize Afghanistan for its own gain, as it provides strategic depth for conflict with India. Lastly, India looks to stabilize

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Afghanistan through economic development to help build its own regional hegemony and enhance its posture regarding Pakistan. While SOJTF-A is unlikely to influence geopolitical considerations, it has potential to influence regional stakeholders in concert with the Department of State's (DoS) diplomatic efforts as a means for guiding long-term success in Afghanistan. For a greater discussion of external influence considerations for Afghanistan, see Appendix A.

Balancing Acts Between External Influencers

Current relations between countries and non-state actors concerning Afghanistan present a delicate balancing act for these parties, one that will likely prove unsustainable as the situation in Afghanistan develops. The triad relationship between Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan poses one of the most prominent balancing challenges. During the Cold War, Afghanistan and Pakistan each harbored groups antagonistic to the other, a shared history that continues to foster suspicion today.¹¹ Pakistani accusations — including against Indian intelligence — resurfaced with the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.¹² As Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan deteriorated, they improved with India. Positive Indo-Afghan relations concern Pakistan, as the situation might leave it encircled by antagonistic neighbors. By encouraging India to play a larger role in Afghanistan, the United States further exacerbates Pakistani concerns about a closely tied Afghan-Indian relationship.¹³ Stability in Afghanistan will require a certain degree of cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Russia and Iran stand as another balancing act, although not as closely tied as the previous case. Russia and Iran both support the Taliban and the government in Kabul. Both claim their intentions as combating ISIS-K and facilitating the peace process. However, Russia maintains better relations with Kabul and arguably sees U.S. forces in the country as necessary. Despite Moscow's rhetoric for coalition forces to leave Afghanistan, Russia would not want to deploy troops to fill the security gap left behind.¹⁴ Iran juxtaposes this position, seeing the departure of the United States as necessary and continued coalition presence as a direct threat to Iran.¹⁵ A change in the current status quo, such as a U.S. withdrawal, may put these two partners at odds with one another.

¹¹ Ahmad Bilal Khalil, "The Tangled History of the Afghanistan-India-Pakistan Triangle," *The Diplomat*, December 16, 2016, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/the-tangled-history-of-the-afghanistan-india-pakistan-triangle/>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Yaqoob Khan Bangash, "Reinjecting Realism: Towards a Pragmatic and Effective Pakistani Foreign Policy," *War on the Rocks*, December 6, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/reinjecting-realism-towards-pragmatic-effective-pakistani-foreign-policy/>.

¹⁴ Samuel Ramani, "The Myth of an Iran-Russia Alliance in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-myth-of-an-iran-russia-alliance-in-afghanistan/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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Finally, Pakistan currently supports an expanded role for Russia in Afghanistan, due to Russia's support of Taliban forces and countering efforts by the United States to mitigate Pakistani influence in the country.¹⁶ However, distrust still defines the relationship. Russia and Pakistan have a history of ups and downs throughout the Cold War as partnerships among the United States, Soviet Union, Pakistan, and India defined each other's relations.¹⁷ Russia's current policies towards the Taliban could flip if the status quo in Afghanistan changes. In addition to the alienation between these two countries in such a scenario, this could also complicate China's position with regards to Afghanistan, as it currently partners with both.¹⁸

¹⁶ Samuel Ramani, "What's Driving Russia-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan?" *The Diplomat*, May 9, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/whats-driving-russia-pakistan-cooperation-on-afghanistan/>.

¹⁷ See Nazir Hussain and Quratulain Fatima, "Pak-Russian Relations: Historical Legacies and New Beginnings," *Central Asia*, No. 72, Summer 2013, pp. 1-15.

¹⁸ Barry Posen, "It's Time to Make Afghanistan Someone Else's Problem: A full withdrawal will force Iran, Russia, and others, to step up," *The Atlantic*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/solution-afghanistan-withdrawal-iran-russia-pakistan-trump/537252/>.

Range of Future Environments

To provide conceptual structure to the future environment, the research team developed a range of six potential environments into which Afghanistan may evolve: *failed state*, *civil war*, *stalemate* (which is the status quo), *moderate political instability* (characterized by low levels of violence), *emerging nation*, and *prosperous nation*. These are illustrated in Figure 4 below. Any attempt at developing considerations for the future requires baseline estimations about what that might look like. For this reason, the team needs to caveat its assessment up front. First, some futures are more likely than others, and none are perfectly accurate. Second, the actual evolution of Afghanistan may contain characteristics of one or more futures, simultaneously. They are not mutually exclusive to one another. Third, different regions of Afghanistan could potentially evolve individually toward different future environments. Finally, what is an acceptable future is a matter of U.S. policy and not for the team to decide. Given these limitations, this study does not recommend a particular future environment as a goal, but simply describes the potential environments, annotating the current proximity to the individual environments, and identifying variables that inhibit (or encourage) movement from one environment to the next. For an in-depth discussion of these six alternative futures, see Appendix B.

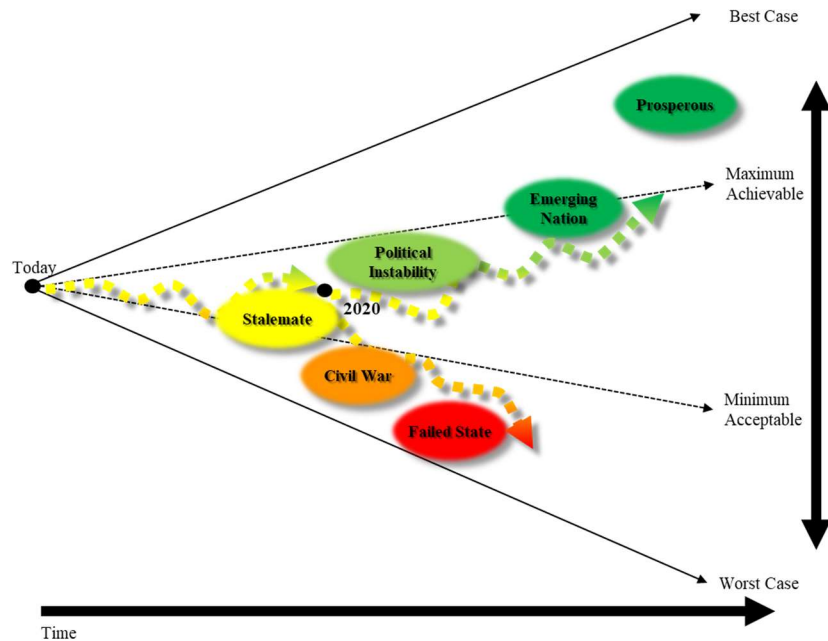


Figure 4. Alternative Afghan Futures

Note: This figure depicts the temporal proximity of each future environment to one another. For example, Afghanistan will more quickly devolve toward civil war or failed state as compared to the evolution towards an emerging nation environment.

Failed State: In a “worst case” environment, Afghanistan presents a failed state. Kabul maintains no legitimacy with the population or monopoly on the use of force. The Afghan security forces largely no longer exist, leaving local warlords and insurgents vying for control over portions of the country. All U.S. and international aid and presence left the country, and legal international trade with Afghanistan is nonexistent. Such a scenario spells out the greatest dangers for Afghanistan, the region, and U.S. national security. Some scholars suggest that Afghanistan’s descent into failure presents an opportunity for a “reboot” that would permit an organic process of rebuilding the country in a manner that fits Afghanistan’s unique needs and is stable; however, the interim period would find Afghanistan ripe for terrorist safe havens.¹⁹

Civil War: In a “civil war” future environment, the Afghan government is unwilling or unable to reconcile with the Taliban or regional political opposition. The government in Kabul is increasingly disconnected from the rest of the country’s population with a corresponding decrease in its legitimacy. The withdrawal of coalition troops and the decline in donor support and foreign aid severely constrain the national budget, and force GIRoA to make hard decisions about which services and initiatives it can continue to fund. The diminished coalition presence allows regional actors to assert themselves in pursuit of their own interests.

Stalemate: In a “stalemate” environment, the current situation in Afghanistan, many of the same issues and challenges Afghanistan faces today perpetuate. This is a result of the ongoing conflict with the Taliban. Although neither side can win definitively, they are unwilling to make the necessary concessions to reach a compromise and end the conflict. Ethnic and political divisions in the country have the potential to become flashpoints for greater instability and descent into the civil war environment. The unstable security situation inhibits greater economic growth while governance over rural areas ebbs and flows as GIRoA influence remains largely confined to urban centers. While U.S. and coalition forces remain in the country, they appear unable to affect significant change. As a result of the coalition’s presence, regional actors (Pakistan and Iran) maintain their balancing act of stymieing U.S. success while preventing a descent into chaos.

Moderate Political Instability: In a “moderate political instability” environment, the Afghan government, economy, and security levels demonstrate modest improvement. While still not self-sufficient, GIRoA can provide security and basic services across the country, with a decreased reliance on international aid and foreign forces. Basic indicators of development trend upwards, with a general sense of optimism among the population for Afghanistan’s future. The improvements in security and way of life are largely tied to the incremental resolution of the conflict with the Taliban, which has been one of the most significant obstacles to progress and

¹⁹ Fisher, Max. “In Afghanistan’s Unwinnable War, What’s the Best Loss to Hope For?” *The New York Times*. February 1, 2018. Accessed February 13, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/world/asia/afghanistan-war.html>.

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reforms. Social and political rifts remain within society, but the central government and civil society are beginning to transfer their focus from the internal conflict toward societal and governmental reform, such as sub-national power-sharing. International presence remains, but is declining in correlation with increases in security and political stability. The Afghan government is in the lead regarding policy-making and strategy, with coalition partners providing advice and support to Afghan institutions. The Afghan government is beginning to exercise its regional diplomatic capabilities to pursue bilateral trade and economic infrastructure development with regional actors.

Emerging Nation: The “emerging nation” environment represents a long-term (multi-decade) goal toward which Afghanistan and its partners strive. In this environment, Afghanistan, as a young democracy, demonstrates potential to flourish not only as a regional partner, but also as a contributing member within the international community. It adequately provides for its population, denies safe haven for terrorist networks, and increases its diplomatic and economic roles. The United States maintains a sustainable footprint in the country to support the government of Afghanistan through normalized embassy operations and enduring military partnership. Internally, government reforms have found an equilibrium between centralized and sub-national distributions of power. The transfer of power is peaceful and challenges to power take place in the political arena, vice violent assertions of power. As a result of social reforms, traditional and modern societies can coexist simultaneously within the country.

Prosperous Nation: In a “prosperous nation” environment, Afghanistan as a thriving democracy is a flourishing regional partner and a contributing member of the greater international community. It stands as a strong example of democracy and economic stability in Central Asia.

Post-2020 Assessment: Divided Between Status Quo and Moderate Political Instability

Currently, this research assesses Afghanistan to be in the “stalemate” environment. By the end of 2020, based on RSM’s strategy and recent changes to U.S. policy, the team anticipates Afghanistan to be trending more towards “moderate political instability.” It is likely that the northern and western regions of Afghanistan will pose more favorable environments (moderate political instability), while the eastern and southern regions remain closer to a stalemate environment and evolve more slowly. Major factors bearing on this assessment’s validity are: the results of GIRoA’s reconciliation efforts with the Taliban and its sub-groups, the credibility of the 2019 elections, GIRoA’s willingness to reach power-sharing compromises with sub-national elements, and the restructuring of the ANDSF to include the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANATF). To be clear, the team does not assess that any of these items will be ‘complete’ by 2020, only that GIRoA and its partners will take (likely) small steps in the right direction. Failing to make progress in these areas will cause Afghanistan to remain in the perpetual stalemate.

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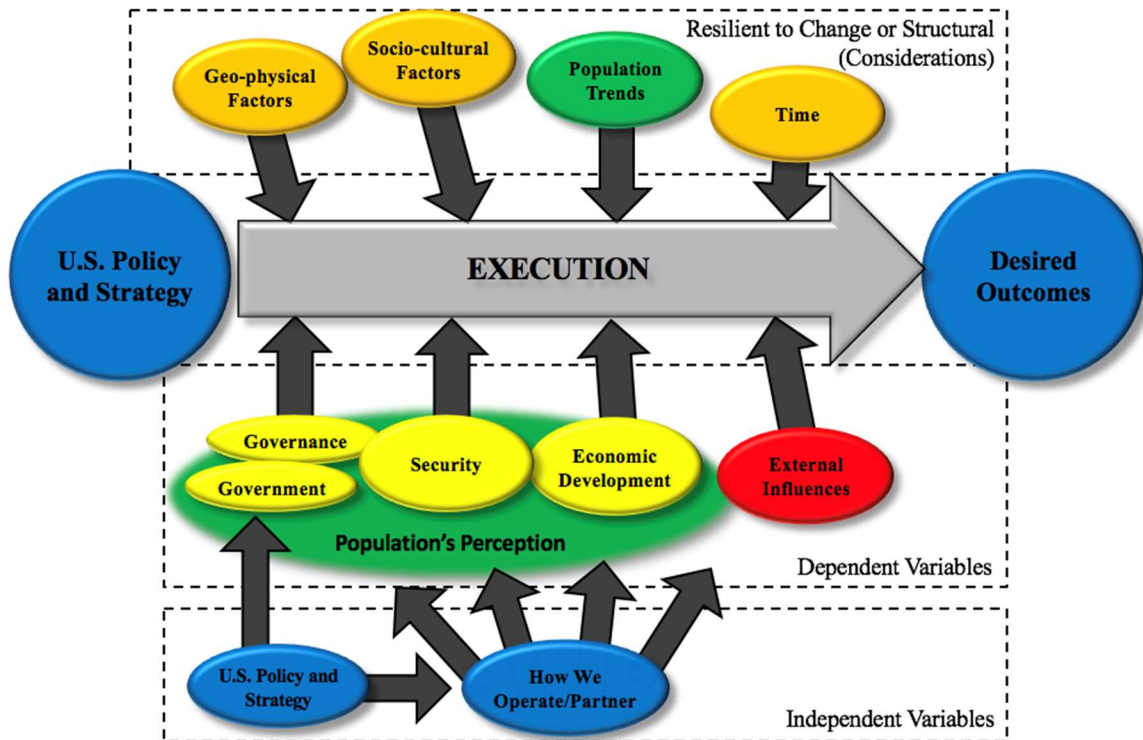
In conducting this assessment, the team established eight assumptions for the near-term post-2020 environment:

1. The presence of general purpose forces will decrease, leaving SOF with a choice to expand its role or remain more narrowly focused on CT and building ASSF capacity.
2. ISIS-K and Al Qaeda (AQ) will be heavily degraded, but small pockets will remain, requiring persistent CT efforts.
3. The conclusion of RESOLUTE SUPPORT is predicated on the achievement of at least partial reconciliation with the Taliban, where, although incomplete, reconciliation efforts are on a downhill slope headed toward 'full' reconciliation.
4. As the degree of conflict subsides, governmental reform and economic development will become larger priorities, requiring the DoS to assume a lead role in Afghanistan with the military in a supporting role.
5. Afghanistan's internal regions and provinces will evolve independently, at varying speeds, and will require individualized approaches.
6. Governance challenges, such as equitable representation, political instability, and ethnic fracturing will assume greater priority over existing security challenges.
7. NATO countries will maintain support and presence in Afghanistan, although support levels will likely decrease over time and their roles will be renegotiated.
8. As the coalition presence decreases and the Afghans assume greater levels of autonomy, regional actors, such as Pakistan, Iran, and Russia, will attempt to assert themselves and expand their spheres of influence.

Factors Influencing Afghanistan’s Future Environment

Based on discussions in the field, academic research, policy analysis, and the development of the future environments, the team restructured its initial set of variables into considerations (socio-cultural, geophysical, population trends, and time), dependent variables (security, governance, economic development, external actors) and independent variables (U.S. Policy and how “we” operate/partner). Figure 5 illustrates this construct. Additionally, influence operations and population perceptions, although not treated as distinct variables, were crucial to the team’s analysis, and are incorporated within each of the dependent and independent variables. The team analyzed each overarching variable to understand the major components that affect it. Each is accompanied by a range of conditions, spanning from “unacceptable,” to “minimally acceptable,” to “preferred.” Analysis of these variables, considerations, components, and conditions inform the team’s identification of the current state and more desirable end states, broadly speaking, in Afghanistan. For the team’s deeper analysis of these variables and sub-components, see Appendix C. Framing these allowed the team to identify specific challenges in the future environment and influenced the development of creative options.

Figure 5. Variables and Considerations



Variables and Considerations

Governance & Government (Dependent Variable): This variable recognizes the distinction between government – the legitimate formal apparatus that develops and implements laws and policy and generates revenue – and governance – the act of governing, often executed by both formal government and informal societal structures from the national to the local level. A critical factor in this variable is the population’s trust and confidence in GIRoA, in part derived from the government’s ability to provide basic services for the population, such as the rule of law, security, and relative degree of economic opportunities. Governance in Afghanistan requires a balance between centralized governmental authority at the national level and a sub-national distribution of power and authority that allows provincial and local governance mechanisms to adequately address the population’s grievances. Other factors in this variable are political unity and stability, which are influenced by ethnic and regional fissures within Afghanistan. Political disunity and instability stymie progress and reform in Afghanistan. The final factor within this variable is the stability and predictability of GIRoA’s yearly budget, which permits or constrains the provision of services, development, and long-term planning.

Security (Dependent Variable): The security variable focuses on the GIRoA’s ability to deny terrorists safe haven and its ability to limit violence to an acceptable level, which provides security to the population and ultimately permits economic development and foreign investment. Factors within this variable include (1) the effectiveness and sustainability (fiscal and logistical) of the ANDSF, (2) resolving or mitigating the insurgent conflict within Afghanistan, (3) the capacity for international terrorist groups (ISIS-K, AQ, etc.) to operate within Afghanistan, and (4) improving the population’s perception of security in Afghanistan.

Economic Development (Dependent Variable): The economic variable focuses on GIRoA’s ability to attract, broker, and generate economic development which will decrease the country’s economic dependence on foreign donors. Economic development depends on GIRoA’s ability to incrementally secure the country to foster an environment which will attract foreign investment. A security-economic nexus exists, meaning that increased security permits increased economic development, which in turn decreases unemployment and provides an opportunity to would-be insurgents. Increased opportunity will also likely improve the population’s perception toward the government as a legitimate governing body. Lack of human capital is another factor within this variable, which both limits further development and the population’s sense of opportunity. Finally, economic development provides necessary revenue for GIRoA to maintain its core functions and pursue critical new initiatives.

External Influences (Dependent Variable): External influencers (stabilizers, pragmatists, and destabilizers) have a critical role in the future of Afghanistan, as every nation has its own objectives and motivations. Most external players, arguably with the exception of Pakistan, desire a stable Afghanistan (although not necessarily a U.S. “success story”) to decrease mass refugee migration, suppress terrorist activities from the region, and increase regional economic

infrastructure. Major factors in this variable are: GIRoA's ability to maintain coalition commitment, political support, and donor support over time; U.S. and Afghan ability to mitigate destabilizing or spoiling activities from regional states (Pakistan, Iran, and Russia); and Afghan and the coalition's abilities to solicit regional states to share the burden for Afghanistan's stability.

How "We" Operate and Partner (Independent Variable): This variable considers the U.S. government's internal structures, functions, and practices, as well as the effectiveness of U.S. partnership with Afghanistan. Factors relating to U.S. entities include: the U.S. government's internal division of labor, continuity, and unity of effort; the development and execution of long-term strategies; and the effectiveness of U.S. government entities' organizational designs and functions in relation to changes in the environment and objectives. Regarding the partnership, the major factor is the degree to which U.S. advisors empower Afghans to take the lead, develop their own solutions and assert their legitimacy while achieving unilateral U.S. interests and shared U.S.-Afghan interests.

Emerging Population Trends (Consideration): Population trends are a structural component to the Afghan environment. These trends are resilient to change – although not impervious to it – and must be considered as any part of strategic planning. The major population trends identified in this study are refugee migration, urbanization, the youth bulge, and increased access to information technology. In particular, rapid urbanization and the expanding youth bulge in Afghan society must be accounted for and adequately addressed in the long-term. Rapid urbanization may overwhelm the government's ability to deliver basic services and unemployment among the youth may create resentment and opportunities for future social movements against the government. GIRoA must accept and leverage the population's growing access to technology to influence support through transparency.

Geo-physical and Social Cultural (Consideration): Afghanistan is naturally divided into four distinct regions. The divisions are a result of both geophysical and socio-cultural factors. Each of the regions has a majority ethnic group, traditional relationship with an external actor, and geophysical obstacles which separate it from other regions, resulting in four unique regions with varied interests and priorities. Aside from ethnic and tribal divisions, Afghanistan, like many other countries, has dichotomies within the population and its values that cause friction – traditional vs. modern, urban vs. rural, and centralized governance vs. decentralized governance. The diverse nature of Afghanistan necessitates tailored approaches for each region and population group. Finally, planners should consider the fact that Afghanistan's terrain naturally prohibits centralized distribution of forces and resources. Although centralization of forces is monetarily cost-effective, the price is paid in the time it takes to react. That said, decentralization is not necessarily the answer. The cost of maintaining fully enabled units and the

potential for regional power-brokers to co-opt those forces and/or resources simultaneously disincentivizes a more decentralized distribution.²⁰

Significant Current, Ongoing, and Future Challenges

From the analysis of the above variables and considerations, the following are significant challenges SOJTF-A and the broader U.S. government will likely face over the next decade. The challenges represent significant obstacles that will preclude or slow Afghanistan's evolution from one future environment to the next. Recognizing significant overlap in the potential environments, the challenges are roughly ordered in terms of proximity to the current environment, not in order of importance. This does not mean, however, that challenges later in the list can be ignored for the time being. Instead, they should be of thought of in terms of those items that will be executed in the near-term and those items that require near-term planning and posturing to set the conditions for long-term success.

Building ANDSF Capacity and Sustainability: Building ANDSF capacity and restructuring the ANDSF over the next half-decade are critical aspects of the security variable. Doubling the ASSF will increase the effectiveness of Ministry of Defense security forces, while the transition of small portions of the ANA to include the ANATF will decrease the budget expenditures and put Afghan Security Forces on a more sustainable path. Although the ASSF is an effective force, their operations require a support force that can hold ground and provide enduring security for the population following ASSF clearance operation. Currently, the ANA and police forces are filling this role ineffectively.

Defeating ISIS-K: While the threat ISIS-K poses in Afghanistan is moderately exaggerated, ISIS-K's defeat in the region remains a key U.S. policy objective. The U.S. military and its Afghan partners will have to maintain pressure on the extremist group while attempting to carry out the range of other efforts.

Improving the Narrative and Influence Operations to Support Strategy: The foundation for progress in Afghanistan will be based on GIRoA's ability to mobilize the population through influence operations to support its efforts and place increasing social pressure on the Taliban to reconcile or reach a settlement. Current influence operations are disjointed and focused on near-term tactical operations. Changing Afghan perceptions will require a long-term, coordinated strategic approach that synchronizes words and actions with a unified narrative for Afghanistan.

Reconciliation and Conflict Resolution: Before the environment can move from stalemate to a more desirable future environment, some form of conflict resolution is required. This will allow GIRoA to relinquish some of its centralized authority to sub-national institutions and begin the process of reform and reconstruction. For Taliban members to reconcile or reach a

²⁰ Authors' Interview, Dr. Gordon McCormick, Expert on Insurgency and Irregular Warfare, interview, Naval Postgraduate School, November 2018.

settlement, they will require viable alternatives to an insurgency that incentivize a move toward peace without alienating the population that did not join the insurgency who may feel that the insurgents are being rewarded. This requires the appropriate mixture of carrots and sticks. If a national peace deal is struck, a major issue may be reintegrating large numbers of former insurgents back into the population all at once. Some of the reintegration will likely happen organically at the local level, while some may require government intervention.

Reintegration and Preventing Future Insurgency: Afghanistan's youth bulge, coupled with unemployment and a potential end to the conflict, present a situation ripe for future insurgency, instability, and safe havens for terrorist organizations. Increased access to social media further exacerbates the potential for radicalization. Preventing future insurgency or expanded criminal activity requires concurrent investments in economic and human capital development to provide a tangible opportunity for the youth population and former insurgents. After four decades of war, young Afghans often lack a sense of hope. Changing this perception would require a concerted influence campaign, which could buy the necessary space and time for tangible reform and development to take hold.

Balancing or Mitigating External State Influence: As the U.S. presence in Afghanistan decreases and GIRoA asserts its autonomy, regional states (Russia, Iran, Pakistan) will attempt to expand their sphere of influence within Afghanistan. The United States will need to consider ways to mitigate or balance these efforts. Additionally, the United States will have to consider whether it favors stability over expanded spheres of influence. Put a different way, will the U.S. permit an arrangement with Iran similar to its arrangement in Iraq?

U.S. Government Organizational Transition: As the situation evolves in Afghanistan, the U.S. government will have to reconsider its deployed structure, organization, and roles to appropriately address changes in the environment. As the situation improves, troop numbers may decrease, and the military must determine how it will accomplish any updated objectives. For example, SOF's role could expand beyond a CT focus and assume a more holistic Foreign Internal Defense role. Additionally, the lead agency could transition from DoD-led to DoS-led.

Budget Sustainability: GIRoA lacks the sufficient capacity for revenue generation and its budget is almost entirely reliant on foreign aid. The lack of budget stability presents significant challenges to planning and implementing long-term policy and strategy. Although the United States established a conditions-based commitment, the commitment remains resource constrained. Continued foreign aid is predicated on GIRoA's ability to produce results and maintain accountability of its expenditures to maintain donor confidence. Over the long-term, GIRoA will have to find ways to decrease expenditures and work with coalition partners and regional states to increase revenue generation and establish a more sustainable budget.

Supporting Afghan Reforms to Government and Governance: GIRoA's centralized government structure creates a zero-sum power dynamic, leading to unequal political representation and exacerbating political and ethnic divisions. GIRoA fears disseminating authority and resources could increase corruption, create warlords, and present challenges to the

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central government, making necessary power-sharing compromises less likely. Afghanistan's cultural and regional diversity create distinct interests and value sets, which complicate the problem and make centralized policies inadequate. To increase political stability and provide necessary services to the population (governance, justice, security) in a timely manner, GIRoA will need to disseminate power and authority to its sub-national structures and find ways to leverage traditional governance mechanisms at the local level.²¹

²¹ Thomas Barfield and Neamatullah Nojumi, "Bringing More Effective Governance to Afghanistan: 10 pathways to Stability," *Middle East Policy Council*, Vol. XVII, Winter, No. 4, <http://www.mepec.org/bringing-more-effective-governance-afghanistan-10-pathways-stability>.

Creative Solutions

While the previous considerations assist in understanding the complex nature of Afghanistan, creative solutions based on these same considerations help to develop innovative ways to shape the future environment. As such, the team developed a list of creative options for tackling problems across the spectrum of operations in Afghanistan. These creative solutions range from an Afghan Conversation Corps for tackling the youth bulge to an Interstate Targeting Force to foster regional burden sharing and partnerships. Based on the current needs of SOJTF-A, the team provided extra analysis to flesh out creative solutions as they relate to Taliban reconciliation, conflict prevention (reintegration), ANDSF transformation, and influence operations via a coherent narrative. These specific solutions, and the challenges they aim to solve, are especially key to ensuring long-term stability in Afghanistan. While the team chose to focus more on these recommended solutions, all the solutions the team explored may prove valuable for framing SOF, or broader U.S., campaign design in Afghanistan. The below descriptions represent the sample of a larger collection of creative solutions by the team. For a longer discussion of the below and the remaining creative solutions, see Appendix D.

Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan

Maintaining the Pressure: To create circumstances most conducive for negotiations, GIRoA must maintain military *and* social pressure on the Taliban while simultaneously providing attractive and feasible alternatives as “off ramps” for those choosing to abandon the fight. Pressure includes kinetic targeting that supports reconciliation as opposed to targets of opportunity, expanding “The Renouncers” program run by the National Directorate of Security, constraining the Taliban’s financial resources, and limiting Pakistan’s role as a safe haven.

Incremental Settlement: Due to the somewhat fractured nature of the Taliban, GIRoA should apply a methodological and targeted approach to pressuring the Taliban in designated areas with greater susceptibility to government influence, while pursuing a simultaneous “bottom-up and top-down” approach to reconciliation efforts. The “top-down” approach refers to national level efforts to achieve a political settlement, while the “bottom-up” approach refers to village and district level reconciliations, which develop more organically.

USSOF’s Role in Shaping the Environment: Though conflict resolution will primarily be the result of political efforts, the military plays a critical role in shaping the environment to make a settlement possible. USSOF will be essential in assisting Afghan forces in targeting Taliban elements (CT) to best set conditions for negotiations, as well as providing the resources necessary to maintain and advance territorial gains (foreign internal defense).

Conflict Prevention in Afghanistan

Short-Term Opportunity for Taliban Reintegration: A regionally oriented program—loosely based on a national model—that simultaneously supports local infrastructure development, provides immediate work opportunity to former Taliban, and teaches basic skills to foster future employment could counter extremism. These opportunities are available to those who reconcile via employment in the short-term and development of skills that former insurgents can leverage in the long-term.

Long-Term Prevention of Extremism in Afghan Youth: A years-long pipeline that engages the youth population and leads to early adulthood, which is intended to assist in countering extremism, while simultaneously fostering national identity, job opportunity, life skills, and hope for the future would be a valuable tool in preventing extremism in young Afghans. Most importantly, it would limit the percentage of the population vulnerable to extremism and radicalization by providing opportunity.

Political and Societal Inclusion: GIRoA must accept that a future in which the Taliban reconcile may also contain former-Taliban filling local leadership positions at the district and potentially provincial levels. Providing economic opportunity through jobs programs, allowing former-Taliban to return to their normal lives, and accepting that some former Taliban will serve in leadership roles within society, will assist in promoting political and societal inclusion, which are critical components to durable stability.

Implementation Needs to be Sustainable and Afghan-Led: In the long-term, the DoD is not the appropriate U.S. agency for preventing radicalization by providing opportunity. The DoS, and specifically the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), should embrace the role as the lead American agency for support to the Afghan government. However, it cannot be a U.S. led effort if reintegration is to succeed; it must be an Afghan project with U.S. support. This program is intended to be cheap and self-sustaining. Costs will be kept relatively low with little overhead thanks to small salaries, low-cost hardware, and local support.

Transition of Roles in Afghanistan

Afghan Government Transition: The current sponsor-client relationship is not sustainable and an ineffective status-quo to promote Afghanistan's sovereignty in the future. The coalition needs to start shifting ownership of the mission to its Afghan partners now. Though the U.S. must continue to exert influence to serve U.S. national interests, failing to encourage Afghan independence and legitimate sovereignty will result in Afghanistan remaining a donor state reliant upon foreign presence and support to function beyond RSM.

Regional Transition: As the timeline moves toward 2020 and beyond, the Afghan government needs to set the conditions for greater regional cooperation external to Afghanistan. The Afghan government can leverage the ASSF's counter-terrorism expertise to build regional security partners through the implementation of a functionally-based Interstate Targeting Force,

the execution of regional CT and counter-narcotics exercises, and the promotion of Professional Military Education exchanges. All of these initiatives encourage partnerships and increase interoperability with partners to promote regional security and cooperation on other issues.

U.S. Transition: The DoD does not have all appropriate institutional expertise or the capacity to execute the variety of tasks needed for the post-RSM transition period which must focus on post-conflict resolution operations. As the coalition moves toward 2020 and beyond, the United States will need to shift the main effort to a DoS solution with the military in a supporting role, such as with the presence of a Special Operations Command Forward (SOCFWD) battalion headquarters. The team recommends designing and employing four regionally-focused Sub-National Interagency Platforms (SNIPs) in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif to support the U.S. Embassy’s mission in Afghanistan at the sub-national level. Regarding function, these unified action platforms would combine USG elements to coordinate, track, and facilitate progress in the security, governance, and development lines of effort. The platforms would also be responsible for maintaining awareness of internal politics, social issues, and security challenges within their respective regions and reporting those changes to the national level headquarters, to promote improved situational understanding. In terms of organization, each platform would be tailor-made for its respective region, adding to or taking away entities as the situation evolves. Ideally, the platform would combine elements from the military, Department of State, USAID, and the Central Intelligence Agency, at a minimum, with a small support staff capable of analyzing and disseminating intelligence relevant to each line of effort. Vietnam’s Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program provides a similar example of this interagency construct, from which planners may draw ideas or lessons learned.²²

Afghanistan Narrative and Influence Operations

The Coalition and GIROA Need a Unified Strategic Narrative: The largest problem with coalition messaging is the perceived – if not actual – lack of a unified strategic narrative in Afghanistan. The lack of a strong narrative puts the U.S. on the defensive, reacting instead of developing a narrative to which the enemy must react and actively counter. This costs time and resources on counter-messaging, telling the audience what not to do, as opposed to communicating a strong message that provides purpose and direction for the target audience—taking the offensive.²³ To further improve narrative and influence operations, the team recommends the following common themes, with a fuller explanation of each in Appendix D:

²² Mandy Honn, Farrah Meisel, Jacleen Mowery, and Jennifer Smolin, “A Legacy From Vietnam: Lessons from CORDS,” *Interagency Journal*, Volume 2, Issue 2, Summer 2011, 41-50. <http://thesimonscenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/08/IAJ-2-2-pg41-50.pdf>

²³ Scott Ruston and Jeffry Halverson, “‘Counter’ or ‘Alternative’: Contesting Video Narratives of Violent Islamist Extremism,” in *Social Media and Visual Propaganda*, ed. Carol Winkler and Cori Dauber, (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2014). The authors address the idea of alternative narratives, which address the grievances of the population, but provide a different route to get there than the extremist narrative.

- Build a better story
- Consult the Afghans
- Leverage Islam and culture
- Appeal to emotion
- Back words with deeds
- Assess messaging organizations
- Consider dissemination mechanisms

Foment Uncertainty for Taliban Families in Pakistan: A military deception or psychological operation effort to foment uncertainty for Taliban member's families in Pakistan may serve two purposes. First, it could sow doubt between the Taliban and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI). Second, it could put direct pressure on Taliban Leaders to consider settlement or reconciliation more thoroughly as a viable alternative.

Increase Social Pressure on Taliban to Pursue Peace: This campaign should be targeted at specific Taliban leaders – likely the moderates who are more susceptible to striking a deal – and the populations within their immediate sphere of influence. Ultimately, the idea is to create a suffocating degree of social pressure on a single, or a small number of, Taliban leader to force reconciliation. This process could be repeated sequentially across the country to avoid overloading the reconciliation apparatus, or it could be simultaneously employed in different parts of Afghanistan. The team recommends starting in the least contested areas—essentially confidence targets—to proof the concept and make improvements before a wider rollout.

Prepare the Battlefield: USSOF would never execute a kinetic operation without preparatory fires. Why not apply this paradigm to non-kinetic actions? To do this, the team suggests that before any new program or action is rolled out, it first requires a substantive messaging (public information) campaign to explain the purpose, function, goals, etc. of the program or action to set the stage and promote realistic expectations within the population. This type of preparatory public information campaign would have relevance to programs and activities relating to reconciliation, reintegration, Taliban inclusion into the political system, transitioning the ANA to the ANATF, economic development projects, and almost any political or social reform.

ANATF Restructure and Building Trust: The downsizing of the ANA and rollout of the ANATF will require a considerable preparatory influence campaign to build an initial degree of trust and confidence in the new institution. In conjunction with the public messaging campaign, ANASF, who already enjoy a great deal of popular trust and confidence, could be employed as an advisor to the ANATF while they are being stood up and beginning initial operations.

ASSF and Taliban Television Series: In terms of influence operations, GIROA may consider initiating a radio, TV, or web-based show focused on the Commandos or ANASF, that depicts their plight, and possibly the plight of Taliban fighters, to provide context to the ethical and

For example, if the target audience wants governmental change, the extremist narrative would say pick up a gun or IED, while the alternative narrative might suggest peaceful protest as an alternative means to the same end.

moral challenges that both sides face, while weaving narratives into the storyline. The show's plot should parallel the progress of the campaign. For example, during the reconciliation phase, it should depict challenges and narratives of that phase. The challenge would be increasing access to it. Options include a YouTube miniseries, Roshan's partnership with Wikimedia to provide free cellular access to Wikimedia's website,²⁴ access to grant, a radio program, or a television show.

Characteristics Common to Any Solution

Based on the team's analysis, all solutions developed to address Afghan problems must incorporate four key characteristics:

- Solutions should favor localized bottom-up approaches that recognize the diverse nature of Afghanistan and its internal regions and are tailored meet those specific challenges. That said, bottom-up solutions will require sustained top-down support from the central government in terms of overt support, resources, and authority.
- Solutions should be Afghan-led and Afghan-implemented, but with U.S. oversight that holds Afghans accountable for the results, as the environment is not resourced unconstrained. Solutions should not be U.S.-led with an Afghan face; the Afghans must take the initiative and assume responsibility for addressing their own challenges with decreasing degrees of U.S. guidance and support. Similarly, the U.S. must permit and support Afghan initiative, while balancing the pursuit of core U.S. interests.
- Solutions should be durable and sustainable, in terms of both funding and changes in leadership or political priorities. Ideally, solutions would be affordable within the existing or expected Afghan government budget. At a minimum, they must recognize the forthcoming decreases in donor support, and be implemented and sustained without excessive U.S. or coalition funding commitments. Leveraging regional actors to share the financial burden may assist in defraying costs while increasing the prospect of success.
- Solutions should be resilient to changes in U.S. and Afghan leadership, policy, and political priorities. Solutions focused on solving widely recognized core issues will enjoy durability; while ancillary efforts or pet projects will be the most susceptible to defunding or simply being forgotten during changes in leadership, fiscal constraint, or in light of an emerging international crisis.
- Finally, once developed, solutions should be implemented in areas that will support their success. Proofs of concept or 'confidence targets' should be used to enhance the

²⁴ Bethan Mckernan, "Afghans to get free access to Wikipedia," *Independent*, October, 9, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/afghanistan-wikipedia-free-access-data-usage-internet-roshan-a7990906.html>

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resiliency of a particular solution before full-scale implementation. Attempting to implement nascent solutions in Taliban-controlled areas (vice Taliban-contested), or on a national scale, will most likely lead to failure.

Conclusions

Far from a complete answer, this document provides a holistic look at the situation in Afghanistan, now and in the future. The near-term goal is to inform the SOJTF-A Commander and his staff on crucial variables that may prove consequential in the forthcoming development of a campaign design for the future utilization of SOF in Afghanistan. This holistic look allows leaders and staff members to assess SOF's current role and determine how that role might change or expand to meet future U.S. military objectives in Afghanistan. Going forward, the NPS Defense Analysis Department team stands ready to assist SOJTF-A in developing the initial framework of a SOF Campaign Design for the future or further exploring the individual elements of such a framework.

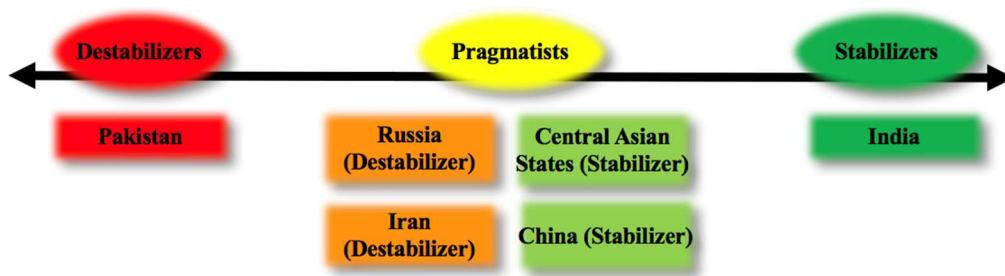
Appendix A. External Influence Considerations in Afghanistan

Foreign Commitment and International Attention

Afghanistan continues to draw the attention of the international community, particularly since the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom. The goals of the U.S.-led coalition in Afghanistan have evolved over the years due to geopolitical complications, yet the U.S. commitment remains. Beyond the coalition, the international community writ large continues to focus on Afghanistan for various reasons, albeit often from the sidelines. These reasons stem from upholding NATO’s Article V mandate, pursuing terrorist networks, combating illegal trade, and suppressing the large flow of immigrants coming from Afghanistan. In other words, instability, extremism, illicit drug trade, and refugees—all emanating from Afghanistan—have the potential to become international problems. Thus, Afghanistan continues to draw worldwide attention.

For SOJTF-A, the options for influence on the global scale are limited. However, success in Afghanistan, and broadcasting Afghan-led successes, will continue to draw international attention. The more successful and stable Afghanistan is perceived to be, the more support it will draw. Yet, the greatest considerations in regard to external influences come from the region surrounding Afghanistan. Specifically, Russia, Iran, China, the Central Asian States (CAS), Pakistan, and India are the key states to consider when examining external influences in Afghanistan. See Figure A.1.

Figure A.1. External Influencers in Afghanistan



Russia and Iran are pragmatic destabilizers who are willing to generate instability in Afghanistan, but not enough to see an entirely failed state. China and the CAS, pragmatic stabilizers, are willing to push Afghanistan toward stability, but only slightly and with their self-interests in mind. Pakistan, the spoiler, is looking to destabilize Afghanistan for its gain, as it provides strategic depth for a conflict with India. Lastly, India looks to stabilize Afghanistan

through economic development to help build its regional hegemony and enhance its posture regarding Pakistan. While SOJTF-A is unlikely to influence geopolitical considerations, it has potential to influence regional stakeholders in concert with the Department of State's diplomatic efforts as a means for guiding long-term success in Afghanistan.

Russia (Pragmatic Destabilizer)

Russia's interests in Afghanistan include perceptions of threats and attempts to expand its leadership role in the region. Drugs trafficked from Afghanistan through the CAS to Russia pose a major concern for Moscow.²⁵ Further, Russian leadership blames the increase in drug trafficking on what they call failed U.S. efforts in Afghanistan and expressed disappointment at the lack of inclusion of counter-narcotics in President Donald Trump's new South Asia Strategy.²⁶ In addition to its criticisms, Russia increased its anti-drug trafficking efforts and cooperation with Central Asian states such as Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, arguably attempting to assert its role as a regional leader in doing so.²⁷

A second perceived threat lies in the expansion of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K). Similar to its narrative on counter-narcotics, Russia accuses the United States of not demonstrating the appropriate amount of concern for this issue.²⁸ Claiming to counter ISIS-K, Russia provides support to the Taliban in the form of military supplies and intelligence.²⁹ However, this relationship reportedly began in 2013, before ISIS-K formed in Afghanistan.³⁰ Another explanation Russia offers is that in cooperating with the Taliban, it hopes to facilitate the peace process.³¹ With this messaging, Russia intends to emerge as a regional leader fostering peace where the United States and NATO forces found only failure. However, the United States sees Russia's actions as only intended to "undermine" coalition efforts.³² In

²⁵ Mark Galeotti, "Narcotics and Nationalism: Russian Drug Policies and Futures," *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Galeotti-Russia-final.pdf>.

²⁶ Statements by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Paul Kaiser, "Lavrov Calls Out NATO's Role in Afghan Drug Trafficking," *Russia Insider*, March 27, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <http://russia-insider.com/en/lavrov-calls-out-natos-high-tolerance-drug-trafficking/ri19345> and The Diplomat, "The Diplomat Examines Russia's Counternarcotics Policies in Afghanistan," *Open Source Enterprise*, December 29, 2017.

²⁷ Samuel Ramani, "Why Russia Wants the US to Stay in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, August 23, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/russias-anti-drug-crusade-in-afghanistan/>.

²⁸ Tolo News, "Afghanistan: Moscow Warns Daesh Fighters Fleeing Syria, Iraq For Afghanistan," *Open Source Enterprise*, December 24, 2017.

²⁹ Javid Ahmed, "Russia and the Taliban Make Amends," *Foreign Affairs*, January 31, 2016, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2016-01-31/russia-and-taliban-make-amends>.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Abdul Basit, "Growing Russian Involvement in Afghanistan," April 17, 2017, *RSIS*, <http://hdl.handle.net/10220/42336>.

³² Ibid and Alex Vatanka, "Iran's Bottom Line in Afghanistan," *Atlantic Council*, November 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/iran-s-bottom-line-in-afghanistan>.

addition to supporting the Taliban, Russia also maintains relations with Kabul, procuring a security agreement in 2016 and providing aid.³³ Some argue that despite Russian rhetoric, Russia wants the United States to remain in Afghanistan.³⁴ This allows Russia to continue increasing its influence in Afghanistan through diplomatic means as opposed to having to deploy its forces.

In terms of potential for SOJTF-A to influence Russian objectives in Afghanistan, the options are limited simply due to geopolitical implications. However, preventing the spread of ISIS-K into Russia's borders and containing the Afghan drug trade are both priorities for Russia. While the tense adversarial relationship between the United States and Russia create numerous constraints for partnership, these two issues present options. At the very least, SOJTF-A can pursue a whole-of-government approach to influencing Russia to combat ISIS-K and Taliban drug trade in the north of Afghanistan, rather than covertly supporting the Taliban. This would help stem Russia's indirect efforts to undermine the Afghan Government.

Iran (Pragmatic Destabilizer)

Iran shares several of the same perceived threats and interests in Afghanistan as Russia but also sees the country more as a zero-sum game. Unlike Russia, Iran shares a border with Afghanistan and faces localized concerns in addition to broader regional balances of power. For example, water remains an issue of contention between Iran and Afghanistan.³⁵ Additionally, Afghan refugees began pouring into Iran as early as the Soviet invasion and continue to flow across the border to this day.³⁶ Reports of Iranian abuse of Afghan refugees sours relations between Tehran and Kabul.³⁷

Like Russia, Iran provides assistance to the Taliban, and may have originally put the Taliban in touch with the Russians.³⁸ Iran reportedly began supplying the Taliban with weapons as early as 2007, but became more open about the relationship after the rise of ISIS-K.³⁹ Iran benefits from the relationship by forming a buffer zone in western Afghanistan against anti-Iranian ISIS-

³³ Arturo Munoz, "While Americans Fight the Taliban, Putin Is Making Headway in Afghanistan," *RAND Blog*, July 31, 2017, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2017/07/while-americans-fight-the-taliban-putin-is-making-headway.html>.

³⁴ Samuel Ramani, "Why Russia Wants the US to Stay in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, August 23, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/why-russia-wants-the-us-to-stay-in-afghanistan/>.

³⁵ Sune Engel Rasmussen, "On the Edge of Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, September 12, 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/09/12/on-the-edge-of-afghanistan-taliban-iran-war-united-states/>.

³⁶ Alex Vatanka, "Iran's Bottom Line in Afghanistan," *Atlantic Council*, November 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/iran-s-bottom-line-in-afghanistan/>.

³⁷ Sune Engel Rasmussen, "On the Edge of Afghanistan."

³⁸ Iran gains [influence](#) in Afghanistan as war continues," transcript, PBS Newshour, August 6, 2017, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/iran-gains-influence-afghanistan-war-continues>.

³⁹ "Iran gains influence in Afghanistan as war continues" and Alex Vatanka, "Iran's Bottom Line in Afghanistan."

K forces, and in return, the Taliban have transit routes through Iran for drug trafficking.⁴⁰ Less successfully than Russia, Iran also attempts to maintain a relationship with Kabul, potentially to increase its influence by facilitating peace talks.⁴¹

Unlike Russia, Iran arguably views Afghanistan more as a winner-take-all scenario. Iran calls for foreign militaries to leave Afghanistan, and accuses the United States of worsening the instability in Afghanistan by remaining.⁴² Further, Tehran fears that the United States intends to use Afghanistan as a launching platform for invading Iran.⁴³ For these reasons, Iran may prove more motivated to stymie coalition efforts in Afghanistan than Russia.

Yet, there is still moderate potential for SOJTF-A, or at least the U.S. Government writ large, to build toward a consensus with Iran in Afghanistan. Akin to Russia, Iran fears the spread of ISIS-K into its borders from Afghanistan. Even more so, the spread of Sunni extremism is a threat to Iran's regime. While direct partnerships between U.S. and Iranian forces are off the table until a dramatic shift in international politics, the United States (and SOJTF-A indirectly) could encourage or allow Iran to target ISIS-K and other Sunni extremists if they encroach upon western Afghanistan.

China (Pragmatic Stabilizer)

According to GEN John Nicholson, China presents a "moderate influencer [in Afghanistan] focused mainly on regional economic interests."⁴⁴ China needs its "One Road, One Belt" (OROB) policy to sustain its current economic growth levels by opening up financial opportunities to its west.⁴⁵ A major component of this policy is the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), intended to create "geographical linkages" of "road, rail, and air transportation" to facilitate economic growth and exchanges.⁴⁶ Following a December 2017 trilateral meeting with China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, China expressed a desire to include

⁴⁰ "Iran gains influence in Afghanistan as war continues," and Sune Engel Rasmussen, "On the Edge of Afghanistan."

⁴¹ Javid Ahmed, "The Enemy of Iran's Enemy in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, June 21, 2015, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2015-06-21/enemy-irans-enemy-afghanistan>.

⁴² Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's Foreign Policy in Post-Taliban Afghanistan," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 37: 2, Summer 2014.

⁴³ Alex Vatanka, "Iran's Bottom Line in Afghanistan."

⁴⁴ "STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD BY GENERAL JOHN W. NICHOLSON, COMMANDER, U.S. FORCES – AFGHANISTAN, BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE ON THE SITUATION IN AFGHANISTAN," February 9, 2017, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Nicholson_02-09-17.pdf.

⁴⁵ Barnett Rubin, "It's Much Bigger than Afghanistan: U.S. Strategy for a Transformed Region," *War on the Rocks*, APRIL 25, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/its-much-bigger-than-afghanistan-u-s-strategy-for-a-transformed-region/>.

⁴⁶ "Introduction," *China Pakistan Economic Corridor*, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <http://cpec.gov.pk/introduction/1>.

transit routes through Afghanistan as part of the CPEC.⁴⁷ However, some analysts encourage onlookers to remain skeptical of this arrangement as Afghanistan's inclusion will require greater levels of cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Pakistan's involvement in providing a safe haven from which terrorist and insurgent groups launch attacks against the Afghan government continue to sour relations.⁴⁸ China also invested directly in Afghanistan in projects such as the Mes Aynak copper mine and the Amu Darya oil fields.⁴⁹

Given China's economic interests, its focus concerning Afghanistan emphasizes stability, particularly as insecurity continues to impede progress on its investments and economic push west. During the December trilateral meeting mentioned above, China, Pakistan, and Afghanistan also reportedly discussed counterterrorism (CT) efforts, with China particularly interested in assistance to maintain control over areas with Uyghur separatist groups.⁵⁰ As a member of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCD), China also meets with Afghan, Pakistani, and U.S. officials to work towards a peaceful resolution to the war in Afghanistan. With China's focus on stability and membership in the QCD, some see China as wanting to play a peacemaker role,⁵¹ while others interpret China's actions with the less ambitious objective of containing or operating around instability in the region so as not to upset its relations with Pakistan.⁵² In the past, the United States encouraged China to play a larger role, hoping that China's close relationship with Pakistan could push the Taliban to the negotiating table.⁵³

Beyond economics, China presents a unique opportunity specifically for SOJTF-A. As a regional and global power, China could open access to its professional military education for

⁴⁷ Ben Blanchard, "China, Pakistan to look at including Afghanistan in \$57 billion economic corridor," *Reuters*, December 26, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://in.reuters.com/article/china-pakistan-afghanistan/china-pakistan-to-look-at-including-afghanistan-in-57-billion-economic-corridor-idINKBN1EK0EQ>.

⁴⁸ Vinay Kaura, "China, US differ on road to peace in Afghanistan," *Middle East Institute*, January 9, 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/china-us-differ-road-peace-afghanistan>.

⁴⁹ Zhao Huasheng, "What Is Behind China's Growing Attention to Afghanistan?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 8, 2015, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2015/03/08/what-is-behind-china-s-growing-attention-to-afghanistan-pub-59286>.

⁵⁰ Harsh V. Pant, "China Brings Afghanistan and Pakistan Together to Discuss Regional Issues, But Divergences Remain," *The Diplomat*, December 29, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/china-brings-afghanistan-and-pakistan-together-to-discuss-regional-issues-but-divergences-remain/>.

⁵¹ See The New York Times (blog), "[China] Exploring a New Role: Peacemaker in Afghanistan," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, January 14, 2015, <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/miscellaneous/recommended-reading/china-exploring-a-new-role-peacemaker-in-afghanistan/> and Petr Topychkanov, "Secret Meeting Brings Taliban to China," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, May 28, 2015, <http://carnegie.ru/2015/05/28/secret-meeting-brings-taliban-to-china-pub-60241>.

⁵² See Halimullah Kousary, "The Afghan Peace Talks, QCG and China-Pakistan Role," *The Diplomat*, July 08, 2016, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/07/the-afghan-peace-talks-qcg-and-china-pakistan-role/> and comments by Siegfried O. Wolf, a researcher at the University of Heidelberg's South Asia Institute, in Shamil Shams, "What does China want to achieve in Afghanistan?" *DW*, June 25, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/what-does-china-want-to-achieve-in-afghanistan/a-39406187>.

⁵³ C. Raja Mohan, "The Great Game Folio: China's Taliban," *Carnegie India*, July 29, 2015, <http://carnegieindia.org/2015/07/29/great-game-folio-china-s-taliban-pub-60891>.

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Afghan Special Security Force (ASSF) officers, in a limited scale. SOJTF-A must ensure the United States does not lose its place as the premier influencer of ASSF, but it is reasonable to encourage a regional power such as China to share at least part of the burden. Further, recent U.S. targeting of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) opens the potential for partnerships with China.⁵⁴ China sees the TIP as a terrorist organization and would potentially support U.S. efforts to target the group and similar groups tied to Uyghur separatists. Such a CT partnership could open pathways for future efforts between the United States, Afghanistan, and China. Specifically, as a CT target, SOJTF-A could lead the way in laying the groundwork for building such partnerships with China.

Central Asian States (Pragmatic Stabilizer)

Though not as monolithic as sometimes presented, the states of Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan have a number of interrelated considerations. Economically, a stable Afghanistan presents opportunities for greater CAS in terms of trade and economic partnerships such as the proposed Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India oil pipeline.⁵⁵ While each CAS nation aims to prevent the spread of terrorism and illicit drug trade from Afghanistan across its border, most have internal security concerns that render Afghan concerns moot.⁵⁶ Furthermore, each also owes some allegiance to Russia and China which complicates their motives.

Despite Chinese and Russian ties, partnership opportunities exist. Along shared borders with Afghanistan, SOJTF-A can encourage efforts to build security partnerships to prevent illicit trade and activities. Additionally, SOF from CAS nations and ASSF could conduct exchange training events to build SOF capacity across the region. Internally, SOJTF-A can build an improved relationship with SOCFWD-CAS and other USSOF efforts across the region. Though limited, CAS presents some potential for partnership with SOJTF-A.

Pakistan (Spoiler)

Pakistan harbors two primary fears for Afghanistan: a strong Afghanistan closely allied with India and an unstable Afghanistan that harbors groups with anti-Pakistani sentiments.⁵⁷ As a

⁵⁴ Dan Lamothe, "Bombing of Chinese Separatists in Afghanistan is a sign of how Trump's war there has changed," *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2018/02/10/bombing-of-chinese-separatists-in-afghanistan-is-a-sign-of-how-trumps-war-there-has-changed/?utm_term=.619a277b0ca0.

⁵⁵ Christian Bleuer, Kazemi, Said Reza, "Between Co-operation and Insulation: Afghanistan's Relations with the Central Asian Republics," *Afghanistan Analysts Network*, January 2014, https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/20140608-ExecSummary-Bleuer_Kazemi-Central_Asia.pdf.

⁵⁶ Bleuer, "Between Co-operation and Insulation."

⁵⁷ Vanda Felab-Brown, "President Trump's Afghanistan Policy: Hopes and Pitfalls," *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, September 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/president-trumps-afghanistan-policy-hopes-and-pitfalls/>.

result, Pakistan benefits from a destabilized Afghanistan and a lackluster government in Kabul. Of Afghanistan's neighbors, Pakistan provides the most support to the Taliban, granting them and their proxy forces training camps, weapons, and equipment.⁵⁸ However, according to interviews with Taliban detainees, the relationship is transactional and not based on trust.⁵⁹ Many analysts argue that Pakistan maintains only limited influence over the Taliban.⁶⁰ Pakistan also serves as one of the four countries in the QCG, originally invited with the hope that Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban could influence the group to come to the negotiating table.⁶¹ Pakistan planned such a meeting during the summer of 2015 – close to Islamabad in order to maintain control over the reconciliation terms – with Taliban close to Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), but the QCG appeared to lose validity after the death of Taliban leader Mullah Akhtar Mansour.⁶²

Like Iran, Pakistan's shared border with Afghanistan opens opportunities for Pakistan to affect Afghanistan. Pakistan capitalizes off illegal trade routes in and out of Afghanistan.⁶³ Through these illegal corridors, Taliban fighters and their proxy forces move freely into Afghanistan and disrupt coalition forces' efforts to stabilize the region. Additionally, the Durand Line, delineated by the British, carved a divide between many tribal and ethnic groups, which do not claim Afghanistan or Pakistan as home.⁶⁴ This "soft" border poses a major source of contention between the two countries.

Potentially, Pakistan is the most complex in terms of SOJTF-A partnerships. However, while it covertly supports the Afghan Taliban, it identifies the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP) as a threat. Thus, a minimal amount of CT partnership along the Afghan-Pakistan border, targeting the TTP, exist for SOJTF-A to leverage. Unfortunately, prior to any such a partnership, a myriad of

⁵⁸ Christopher Clary, "Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Limits of U.S. Influence," *War on the Rocks*, August 23, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/afghanistan-pakistan-and-the-limits-of-u-s-influence/> and Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan Quagmire," *Brookings Institution*, August 24, 2013, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/pakistan-taliban-and-the-afghan-quagmire/>.

⁵⁹ Michael Kugelman, "IF RECONCILIATION FAILS IN AFGHANISTAN, WHAT'S PLAN B?" *War on the Rocks*, March 10, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/if-reconciliation-fails-in-afghanistan-whats-plan-b/>.

⁶⁰ See Bruce Riedel, "Pakistan, Taliban and the Afghan Quagmire" and Michael Kugelman, "IF RECONCILIATION FAILS IN AFGHANISTAN, WHAT'S PLAN B?"

⁶¹ Michael Kugelman, "IF RECONCILIATION FAILS IN AFGHANISTAN, WHAT'S PLAN B?" *War on the Rocks*, March 10, 2016, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/03/if-reconciliation-fails-in-afghanistan-whats-plan-b/>.

⁶² Barnett Rubin, "It's Much Bigger than Afghanistan: U.S. Strategy for a Transformed Region," *War on the Rocks*, APRIL 25, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/04/its-much-bigger-than-afghanistan-u-s-strategy-for-a-transformed-region/> and Vinay Kaura, "China, US differ on road to peace in Afghanistan," *Middle East Institute*, January 9, 2018, <http://www.mei.edu/content/article/china-us-differ-road-peace-afghanistan>.

⁶³ Jayshree Bajoria, "The Troubled Afghan-Pakistani Border," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated March 20, 2009, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/troubled-afghan-pakistani-border>.

⁶⁴ Jayshree Bajoria, "The Troubled Afghan-Pakistani Border," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated March 20, 2009, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/troubled-afghan-pakistani-border>.

complex challenges must be negotiated by other facets of the U.S government. Therefore, SOJTF-A is limited in its ability to influence Pakistan.

India (Stabilizer)

India's actions in Afghanistan remain limited to aid and reconstruction assistance, despite the security-oriented Strategic Partnership Agreement signed in 2011. India has conducted training of Afghan forces – only on Indian soil – but stalled on a military equipment sale, likely to not upset Pakistan, until President Ashraf Ghani simply canceled it.⁶⁵ While President Trump called on India to play a larger role in Afghanistan, Arun K. Singh, former Indian ambassador to the United States, argued that India's current approach is the least controversial role that India can play in Afghanistan that also helps stabilize and secure the country.⁶⁶ Increased efforts by India to influence Afghanistan would likely antagonize Pakistan.

India, due to a number of unique factors, offers the greatest opportunity for partnership in Afghanistan. Yet, complex geopolitical considerations present potential complications. Chief among these is the tense relationship between India and Pakistan. Despite these complications, SOJTF-A can encourage potential professional military education (PME) exchanges between Indian and Afghan SOF. Additionally, with SOJTF-A's assistance ASSF can travel to India for bilateral training exchanges. If it does not create too much tension with Pakistan, Indian SOF could even travel to Afghanistan for similar training exchanges, but within Afghanistan. Lastly, India's relationship with Iran could be leveraged to stymie Iranian efforts to undermine the United States in Afghanistan.

Balancing Acts Between External Influencers

Current relations between countries and non-state actors concerning Afghanistan present a delicate balancing act for these parties, one that will likely prove unsustainable as the situation in Afghanistan develops. The triad relationship between Pakistan, India, and Afghanistan poses one of the most prominent balancing challenges. During the Cold War, Afghanistan and Pakistan each harbored groups antagonistic to the other, a shared history that continues to foster suspicion today.⁶⁷ Pakistani accusations — including against Indian intelligence — resurfaced

⁶⁵ Alyssa Ayres, "Why the United States Should Work With India to Stabilize Afghanistan," Policy Innovation Memorandum No. #53, *Council on Foreign Relations*, April 8, 2015, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/report/why-united-states-should-work-india-stabilize-afghanistan>.

⁶⁶ The Print Team, "Talk Point: What more can India do in Afghanistan without provoking Pakistan?" *The Print*, October 26, 2017, <https://theprint.in/2017/10/26/talk-point-can-india-afghanistan-without-provoking-pakistan/>.

⁶⁷ Ahmad Bilal Khalil, "The Tangled History of the Afghanistan-India-Pakistan Triangle," *The Diplomat*, December 16, 2016, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/12/the-tangled-history-of-the-afghanistan-india-pakistan-triangle/>.

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with the U.S.'s invasion of Afghanistan in 2001.⁶⁸ As Afghanistan's relations with Pakistan deteriorated, they improved with India. Positive Indo-Afghan relations concern Pakistan, as the situation might leave it encircled by antagonistic neighbors. By encouraging India to play a larger role in Afghanistan, the United States further exacerbates Pakistani concerns of a closely tied Afghan-Indian relationship.⁶⁹ Despite their current relations, stability in Afghanistan will require a certain degree of cooperation between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Russia and Iran stand as another balancing act, although not as closely tied as the previous case. Russia and Iran both support the Taliban and the government in Kabul. Both claim their intentions as combating ISIS-K and facilitating the peace process. However, Russia maintains better relations with Kabul and arguably sees U.S. forces in the country as necessary. Despite Moscow's rhetoric for coalition forces to leave Afghanistan, Russia would not want to deploy troops to fill the security gap left behind.⁷⁰ Iran opposes this position, seeing the departure of the United States as necessary and continued coalition presence as a direct threat to Iran.⁷¹ A change in the current status quo, such as a U.S. withdrawal, may put these two partners at odds with one another.

Finally, Pakistan currently supports an expanded role for Russia in Afghanistan, due to Russia's support of Taliban forces and countering efforts by the United States to mitigate Pakistani influence in the country.⁷² However, distrust still defines the relationship. Russia and Pakistan have a history of ups and downs throughout the Cold War as partnerships among the United States, Soviet Union, Pakistan, and India defined each other's relations.⁷³ Russia's current policies towards the Taliban could flip if the status quo in Afghanistan changes. In addition to the alienation between these two countries in such a scenario, this could also complicate China's position with regards to Afghanistan, as it currently partners with both.⁷⁴

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Yaqoob Khan Bangash, "Reinjecting Realism: Towards a Pragmatic and Effective Pakistani Foreign Policy," *War on the Rocks*, December 6, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/12/reinjecting-realism-towards-pragmatic-effective-pakistani-foreign-policy/>.

⁷⁰ Samuel Ramani, "The Myth of an Iran-Russia Alliance in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/10/the-myth-of-an-iran-russia-alliance-in-afghanistan/>.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Samuel Ramani, "What's Driving Russia-Pakistan Cooperation on Afghanistan?" *The Diplomat*, May 9, 2017, accessed January 13, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/05/whats-driving-russia-pakistan-cooperation-on-afghanistan/>.

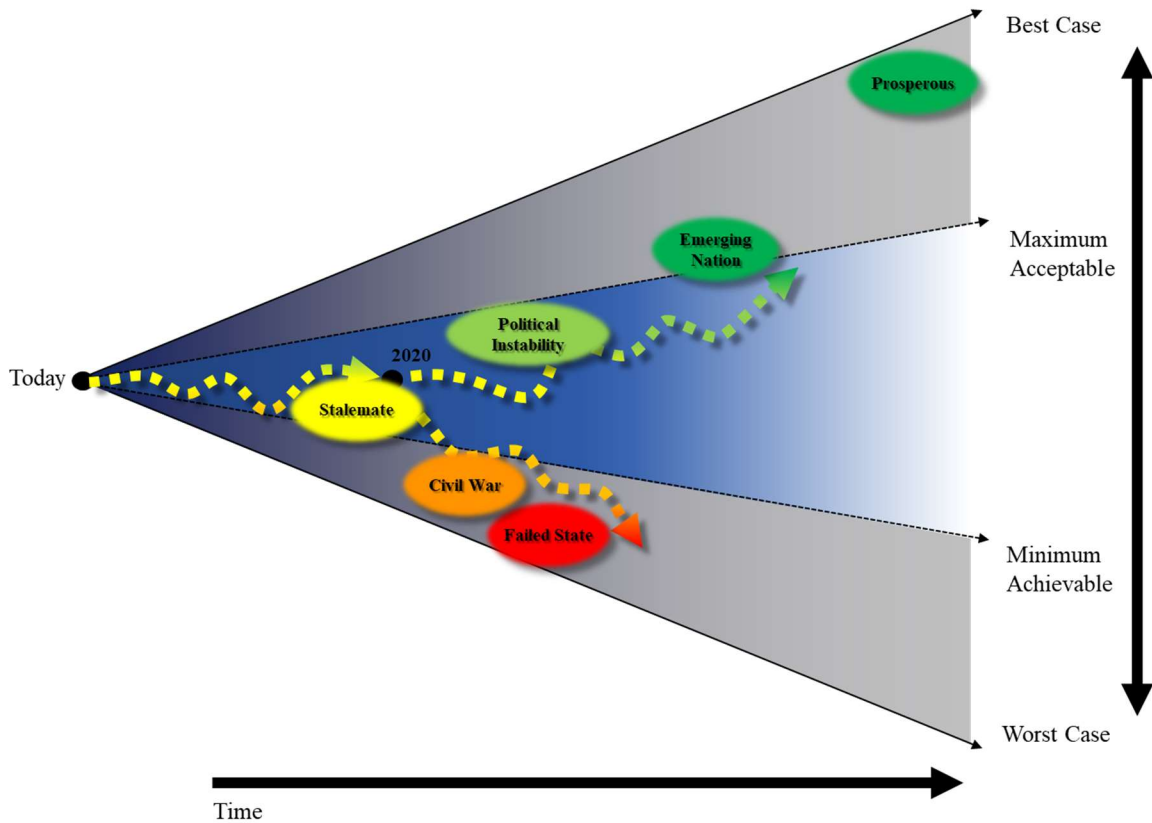
⁷³ See Nazir Hussain and Quratulain Fatima, "Pak-Russian Relations: Historical Legacies and New Beginnings," *Central Asia*, No. 72, Summer 2013, pp. 1-15.

⁷⁴ Barry Posen, "It's Time to Make Afghanistan Someone Else's Problem: A full withdrawal will force Iran, Russia, and others, to step up," *The Atlantic*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/08/solution-afghanistan-withdrawal-iran-russia-pakistan-trump/537252/>.

Appendix B. Alternative Futures in Afghanistan

While predictive analysis poses numerous issues, and the future of Afghanistan cannot be known, an assessment of a range of potential alternative futures can help frame analysis of Afghanistan post-2020. In this study, the team shaped this range around what the United States would find acceptable and what it can realistically achieve in Afghanistan. This took shape in two key variables: time and a range demonstrating a best to worst case scenario. As shown in Figure B.1 below, the best outcomes for Afghanistan would likely take longer to achieve than the worst-case scenarios to unfold.

Figure B.1. Range of Alternative Environments



Note: This figure depicts the temporal proximity of each future environment to one another. For example, Afghanistan will more quickly devolve toward Civil War or Failed State as compared to the evolution towards an Emerging Nation environment.

The below analysis represents the various scenarios depicted in Figure B.1. They are not meant to be inclusive of all potential futures but rather a general outline of what different kinds

of future environment might look like for Afghanistan, discussed in order from worst case to best case futures.⁷⁵

Worst Case Future: Failed State

In a “worst case” environment, Afghanistan is a failed state. Kabul maintains no legitimacy with the population or monopoly on the use of force. The Afghan security forces no longer exist, leaving vying local warlords and insurgents to take control over portions of the country. All U.S. and international aid and presence left the country, and legal international trade with Afghanistan is nonexistent. Such a scenario spells out the greatest dangers for Afghanistan, the region, and U.S. national security.

In this future, legitimate governance in Afghanistan does not exist. The withdrawal of international aid and forces precipitated a complete collapse of the Afghan government. Embassies, investors, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) withdraw completely from the country as violence levels rise. The remnants of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) postponed elections indefinitely, while the local population no longer participates in any aspect of the political process. Provision of basic services such as utilities, infrastructure, and access to medicine ceased. As a result, Afghans no longer view the central government as having any legitimacy. Local powerbrokers, Taliban leaders, warlords, and some groups reminiscent of the Northern Alliance hold power in a fractured Afghanistan.

As power divided among disparate regions in Afghanistan, violence levels rose as these leaders vied for greater power and terrorist safe havens emerged. Without the presence of Afghan security forces, terrorist training grounds and headquarters developed across the country. Groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant – Khorasan Province (ISIS-K) and Al Qaeda (AQ) now boast control over large swaths of territory from which they plan and execute attacks internationally and against Afghanistan’s neighbors. While local powerbrokers provide security within their jurisdictions, travel across the country at large is no longer safe, particularly on established routes, such as Highway 1.

⁷⁵ For additional alternative futures from other analysts, see Brigadier Naveed Mukhtar, “Afghanistan – Alternative Futures and Their Implications,” *U.S. Army War College*, March 2011, accessed February 13, 2018, <http://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/parameters/articles/2011summer/mukhtar.pdf>; Frederic Grare, “Afghanistan Post-2014: Scenarios and Consequences,” *The German Marshall Fund of the United States*, February 2014, accessed February 13, 2018, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/afghanistan-post-2014-scenarios-and-consequences>; Gerald F. Hyman, “Afghanistan After the Drawdown: U.S. Civilian Engagement in Afghanistan Post-2014,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, April 2014 accessed February 13, 2018, https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/140407_Hyman_AfghanAfterDrawdown_WEB.pdf; Zohaib Najam Baig, “Future tense: lessons from the best and worst cases in Afghanistan from Pakistan’s perspective,” *Naval Postgraduate School*, March 2017 accessed February 13, 2018, https://calhoun.nps.edu/bitstream/handle/10945/53010/17Mar_Baig_Zohaib.pdf?sequence=1; Max Fisher, “In Afghanistan’s Unwinnable War, What’s the Best Loss to Hope For?” *The New York Times*, February 1, 2018, accessed February 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/01/world/asia/afghanistan-war.html>.

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Without a regulating government and foreign assistance, the Afghan economy crashes. Due to the lack of international aid or investment and rising insecurity that limits economic activity, inflation is rampant, ultimately resulting in a lack of use of the Afghani by the general population. Other forms of payment and bartering increase while all trade remains localized and limited. Afghanistan ceases to export goods, and farming for local consumption dominates economic activity. Illicit trade and the black market expanded, making the drug trade the primary form of revenue generation within the country.

Given the collapse of the Afghan government, the United States cannot conduct operations from within the country. Instead, the U.S. conducts occasional kinetic strikes from external locations, but these remain limited given the difficulties of projecting across greater distances. In addition to the military relationship, the United States no longer has a diplomatic engagement in Afghanistan, having removed its embassy and support personnel from the country.

The population of Afghanistan exhibits clear divisions with little-perceived hope for the future. The fracturing of the country into regional fiefdoms isolates Afghans from one another. Kabul has no means of messaging or influencing the broader population, and means of communication continue to decline as internet access becomes scarce or restricted. The Taliban retakes control over significant portions of the country, implementing Sharia Law and stringent policies with intimidation. Many areas shut down schools and restrict access to education. Schools that remain open become a mechanism for influencing the younger generation. The Taliban projects itself as the legitimate ruler of Afghanistan. Overall, the population has a pessimistic outlook and a lack of hope in any future democracy. Instead, basic needs such as security and survival dominate their concerns. These circumstances led to mass emigration of Afghans, particularly to Iran, Pakistan, and Europe as refugee numbers rose.

With the failure of Afghanistan as a state, malign regional influencers accelerated their meddling activities while benign countries abandoned their neighbor. Iran and Pakistan both exert extensive influence across porous borders which facilitates fluid transportation of both terrorists and drugs. Russia promotes the narrative of Afghanistan as a “U.S. failure,” comparing the experience to the U.S. war in Vietnam and questioning the U.S. resolve elsewhere in the world. China abandons its investments, while India transitions away from cooperation with Kabul.

Most-Likely Worst Future: Civil War

In a “civil war” future environment, the Afghan government is unwilling or unable to reconcile with the Taliban or regional political opposition. The government in Kabul is increasingly disconnected from the rest of the country’s population with a corresponding decrease in its legitimacy. The withdrawal of coalition troops and the decline in donor support and foreign aid force GIRoA to make hard decisions on which initiatives it can continue to fund within the depleted national budget.

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In terms of governance, regional power brokers and insurgent organizations compete amongst each other for influence alternatives to GIRoA following the power vacuum left by the coalition. Kabul proves unable to reconcile its policies with the needs and interests of Afghanistan's diverse internal regions and population groups. A significantly diminished budget contributes to a continuous decline in delivery of services, forcing the population to rely on regional and local powerbrokers. Additionally, after several postponements, the most recent elections took place but were largely considered illegitimate. Most of the population viewed the candidates as puppets of Kabul, resulting in a low voter turnout. The central government's unwillingness to reconcile with the Taliban and provide some form of political representation for its constituents deepened the ethnic and regional divides that existed before the elections. Corruption expands beyond the tolerable levels for both Afghans—which view almost the entire government apparatus as corrupt—and the international community—which rescinded financial aid as a result of the rampant misuse of funds.

In the government's absence, the population increasingly turns to warlords, local powerbrokers, and insurgent organizations for security, dispute resolution, employment, infrastructure repair and management, and other services. This loss of faith in the government creates a divide that proves difficult, if not impossible for the central government to surmount without massive restructuring. Some current population trends include an increase in Islamist extremism, heightened ethnocentricity, increased emigration, and a youthful population with few opportunities.

Economically, Afghanistan's measures of stability continue to worsen: the currency is devaluing; the import-export ratio is expanding; the gross domestic product (GDP) is decreasing; the government's ability to collect revenue is declining; regional trade is shrinking; and black market and illicit trade are expanding. All pending contracts for foreign investment have been canceled or postponed indefinitely. Few international businesses even consider investing in Afghanistan. Regarding infrastructure, development continues to stall with repairs stacking up on existing projects. Repair funding prioritizes the metropolitan centers, allowing insurgents and regional powerbrokers to assert themselves as service providers in rural areas. Finally, while NGOs and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) remain involved in Afghanistan, the security situation diminishes their effectiveness.

Regarding security, the previous stalemate favors the Taliban. To break the stalemate, the Taliban unite their factions, both within Afghanistan and across the Afghan-Pakistani border. Their gains resulted from diminished opportunities for the bulging youth population and a successful narrative. Moreover, the Taliban hold a cooperative relationship with ISIS-K and AQ, allowing the groups to synchronize their efforts against the government and international partners. The Taliban and other groups control, or strongly contest, most of the rural areas and large portions of Highway 1 and other key lines of communication. As a result, the population is increasingly isolated to extra-district travel. The Afghan National Security Defense Forces' (ANSDF) operations and patrols remain restricted to population centers. Insurgent organizations

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can infiltrate these population centers to conduct terror attacks, which have increasingly found success at coercing the central government into compliance. The military, specifically the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF), and National Directorate of Security (NDS) stand as the only security entities with any degree of legitimacy. Throughout the country, powerbrokers coopt the police for support. Over the course of the fighting season, ANSDF endures increasingly unsustainable casualties, resulting in a lack of continuity and capability on top of its manpower decrease. The government's budget further complicates the situation, curtailing ANSDF's ability to pay these forces on time, if at all.

The withdrawal of foreign advisors, beginning in 2020, exacerbates the security problem. The coalition forces that remain in country predominantly focus on counterterrorism (CT); however, the central government is increasingly reticent to authorize CT operations for force protection concerns and a fear of public backlash or insurgent retribution attacks. In turn, this increases tension amongst Afghan and U.S. officials. Advisory partnerships remain at the national level, as opposed to tactical and operational levels where they are especially needed due to the increased attrition of the ANSDF. Additionally, the advisory effort predominantly focuses on the ASSF, with sporadic engagements with the Afghan National Army (ANA) and almost no engagement with Ministry of Interior forces—which bear the brunt of the counterinsurgency (COIN) effort. The lack of engagements is largely due to the low number of advisors, force protection concerns, and the increasingly constrained foot-print across the country. Finally, the lack of development funding, focus on security concerns, and lack of freedom of maneuver forces the Department of State into a position with little influence or ability to affect stability in Afghanistan.

As discussed above, the withdrawal of foreign financial and security support precipitates much of this deterioration. As security declines, most of the embassies and consulates within Afghanistan close given concerns of force protection, further exacerbating the situation. The diminished Western presence invites greater involvement from Iran and Pakistan to increase their influence to affect stability for their respective interests. While a weakened GIROA fulfills some of Pakistan's objectives via India's influence in Afghanistan, the increased instability lent itself to safe havens for Pakistan-focused insurgents and terrorists, threatening Islamabad. In the west, Iran continues to expand its efforts to stabilize the western portion of Afghanistan to maintain its security buffer against terrorist attacks from Sunni-based extremist groups, like ISIS-K. Furthermore, the deteriorating situation increases the refugee flow to Afghanistan's regional neighbors and Europe, escalating security threats and costs for those countries. Both Russia and China remain concerned about the threat that Islamic extremists and refugees pose to their states' security.

The Status Quo

In a “status quo” environment, many of the same issues and challenges Afghanistan faces today perpetuate. This is a result of the ongoing conflict with the Taliban. Although neither side can win definitively, neither side is willing to make the necessary concessions to reach a compromise and end the conflict. The unstable security situation inhibits greater economic growth while governance over rural areas ebbs and flows as GIROA influence remains largely confined to urban centers. While U.S. and coalition forces remain in the country, they appear unable to affect significant change.

In this future, the heavily U.S.-influenced Afghan government remains highly centralized. GIROA increasingly looks to the United States and the broader coalition for approval and guidance. National level policies ignore regional interests and priorities. The government proves moderately effective at the higher echelons in Kabul, but not at the local levels down at the provincial or district levels. This is in part due to the difficulties posed by limited communication capabilities to rural areas, but also because GIROA continues to appoint ineffective local leaders. As a result of the inept governance at the local level, power brokers, including insurgents, fill that role and now have more influence over the rural population than the central government. Corruption levels remain moderate but tend to worsen the farther away from Kabul. GIROA postponed the 2019 elections, blaming corruption and a lack of perceived legitimacy in the process.

The security situation in Afghanistan remains at a strategic stalemate with the Taliban. The Afghan forces show low morale while the Taliban continue to fracture. As the ANA’s effectiveness improves, police force capabilities decline. ANDSF cannot sustain themselves logistically and lack the intelligence capability to effectively target the Taliban. These shortcomings enable the Taliban to capture and control entire districts outside the reach of security forces.

Economically, Afghanistan struggles to generate economic growth as it continues to rely heavily on foreign aid. Foreign investors remain hesitant to enter Afghanistan given the unstable security situation. GIROA appears incapable of providing essential services and basic infrastructure for the population. This results in increased participation in the black market and illicit trade within the rural areas. Many turn to poppy cultivation, furthering the illegal drug trade. Ultimately, the Afghan government proves unable to sustain itself and remains dependent on the largess of international donors.

The U.S.-Afghan partnership performs as during the RESOLUTE SUPPORT MISSION with a few minor changes. Afghan SOF are realigned regionally while the United States partners with the Special Operations Kandaks (SOKs) in the north, east, and south. The coalition focuses on CT with USSOF advising and assisting in CT and direct-action missions. While Afghans represent the face of these missions, U.S. forces provide almost all the capabilities, highlighting ASSF dependence on USSOF. At the higher echelons of the military, the Security Forces

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Assistance Brigade (SFAB) partner at the brigade and corps levels, providing better continuity throughout the forces. However, logistical problems prevent them from any increased success on the battlefield. Within the U.S. government's approach to the partnership, DoD remains the lead with Department of State confined to the embassy for security reasons. Lack of involvement by the State Department in partnership with GIRoA to advise and assist continues to prove problematic to the DoD efforts.

A deep division exists between Afghans in urban versus rural areas of the country. Afghanistan lacks a national identity and continues to experience ethnic-based conflicts. Migration to foreign countries contributes to a brain drain, compounded by the rural areas controlled by the Taliban having little access to education. However, the populations in these areas view the Taliban as more legitimate than GIRoA. Overall, the general population views the government as corrupt and self-serving, but perceive the ANDSF as a legitimate and effective force that serves to protect them. Social media use grows across Afghanistan, but the implications remain unknown. While this and other emerging technologies improve, they remain in short supply in rural areas, perpetuating GIRoA inability to communicate with its entire population.

Within the region, Afghanistan security continues to pose both threats and opportunities for neighboring countries who seek to gain influence. Malign influence from countries like Pakistan, Russia, and Iran exacerbates and compounds U.S. and GIRoA efforts at improving the security situation.

Acceptable Future: Moderate Political Instability

In a "moderate political instability" environment, the Afghan government, economy, and security levels demonstrate modest improvement. While still not self-sufficient, GIRoA can provide security and basic services across the country, with a decreased reliance on international aid and foreign forces. Basic indicators of development trend upwards, with a general sense of optimism among the population for Afghanistan's future.

Regarding service delivery, the population generally chooses GIRoA over the Taliban or other insurgent groups thanks to Kabul's recent willingness to disseminate greater portions of its power and resources to sub-national levels. GIRoA embodies more of a decentralized federation that satisfies the localized ethnic and regional interests of the population. Elections are held for the district, provincial, and national levels and are generally seen as legitimate. They occur on time, with increasing voter-participation. Although the population occasionally disputes the results, election-related violence is rare. As a result of GIRoA's accountability efforts, patronage and corruption decreased to tolerable levels. In turn, this fostered greater trust between the population and the central government. GIRoA influence moderately extends beyond urban areas and maintains a monopoly over the rule of law.

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At this stage, GIRoA maintains security over 80 percent of the population. Negotiations with the Taliban as part of the reconciliation effort are well underway and nearly complete. The Taliban have political representation at the district level while influence by warlords and other powerbrokers is minimized. The population views the ANDSF as legitimate, and forces now serve in locations close to their homes. This affords the ANDSF and the local populace with a mutual interest in maintaining a safe and secure environment. The Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANATF) component provides local security.

Afghanistan's GDP rate grows steadily and contributes to an increasingly autonomous economy. At this point, foreign aid scaled back as Afghanistan can moderately sustain its government and security forces through its growing, yet nascent economy. Afghanistan trades primarily with regional neighbors but also boasts established trade agreements with other countries, allowing Afghanistan to export its natural minerals and other resources. The level of international investment is slowly increasing, as are domestic revenues resulting from newly established businesses. The government and private sector's investments in Afghanistan's infrastructure and essential services are beginning to expand outside major cities and into the mid-sized urban areas. City centers now connect to urban areas surrounding the major hubs with roads, electricity, water, and railways. GIRoA maintains control over the opium trade and regulates it.

U.S., NATO, and Afghan forces' partnerships continue but shifted in their respective responsibilities. At this stage, Afghan forces now exert a larger leadership role in CT operations. As a result, the United States performs more of an advisory role and less of a support role for the CT platform and operations. SFABs successfully integrate with the ANDSF. Members of the ANSDF also participate in International Military Education and Training (IMET) in U.S. schools.

Security levels in Afghanistan are high enough that the local population and foreigners have freedom of movement throughout the country, without fear of being attacked, kidnapped, or killed. Ethnic and tribal divisions diminish as a unified Afghan identity emerges. The population views the government and its subordinate leaders as legitimate. Afghans hold optimism for the future of Afghanistan with a clear path for development. Civil freedoms are respected for the population to participate in politics, community organizations, and education. Education and employment rates continue to rise, prompting predictions that indicators such as literacy will continue to climb. While Afghans have greater opportunities for students to study abroad, concerns of a brain drain are minimal. With GIRoA providing for basic needs and services, the government and its security forces enjoy high approval ratings.

GIRoA can influence and message its population beyond urban areas. Political, economic, and security elements conduct activities and disseminate information with trust. Afghanistan engages diplomatically with China, Iran, Pakistan, and Russia to increase constructive activities and partnerships and decrease malign influencing activities.

Most-Likely Best Future: Emerging Nation

In an “emerging nation” environment, Afghanistan, as a young democracy, demonstrates potential to flourish not only as a regional partner, but also as a contributing member within the international community. It adequately provides for its population, denies safe haven for terrorist networks, and increases its diplomatic and economic roles. The United States maintains a sustainable footprint in the country to support the government of Afghanistan through normalized embassy operations and enduring military partnership.

In this future, GIRoA is a fully functioning democracy that balances a strong centralized national government, able to engage with international partners, while empowering a decentralized local governmental apparatus that caters to the rural population. Due to the government’s ability to plan, organize, and conduct timely and fair elections at the district, provincial, parliamentary, and presidential levels, the international community and over 80 percent of the domestic population view these elections as legitimate. The government adequately provides reliable basic services, to include utilities, security, and education, for major urban areas. Since the government provides basic services to the population, traditional warlords, powerbrokers, and threat networks are marginalized and do not exhibit noteworthy influence over the population. While portions of the Taliban remain an insurgency, the organization largely participates in the political process as an independent political party, winning elections primarily in rural areas.

The government’s ability to project influence around the country reinforces the legitimacy and credibility of the ANDSF. The ANDSF provide adequate protection for the population, as violence remains at an acceptable level. The international community and local population view the ANDSF as a legitimate force. The Afghan National Police holds responsibility for securing the country, with the support of the ANATF. The ANA conducts major clearance operations, when necessary, but primarily focus on external threats. The ANDSF apparatus can unilaterally execute full-spectrum security operations. The improved security situation in Afghanistan successfully denies terrorist networks safe haven, causing these entities to relocate. The ANSS contribute to the regional counterterrorism effort outside of Afghanistan, executing missions such as Foreign Internal Defense (FID) and Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) with regional partners.

Renewed security in Afghanistan, coupled with a legitimate government, attracts new foreign investment. In this environment, investors view Afghanistan as an emerging market. Technological and physical infrastructure developments steadily increase around major urban areas and slowly spread to less developed ones. The national government can increase the country’s economic ties with regional partners such as India, Pakistan, Iran, and the Central Asian States (CAS), eventually leading to participation in the Central Asia Trade Organization (CATO). With economic ties to regional partners and a steady flow of foreign investments, Afghanistan no longer depends on foreign aid and donations. The government can negotiate and

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attract foreign investments to monetize natural resources such as minerals and cash crops through exports and trade agreements. Overall, Afghanistan achieves a self-sustaining economy.

As Afghanistan develops into a young democracy, USSOF elements maintain an enduring engagement strategy through JCETs and Counter-Narcoterrorism Training (CNT) events. In a train, advise, and assist partnership, U.S. and coalition troops do not accompany Afghan forces on operations except under certain circumstances, to the last position of cover and concealment. The exception includes high-value targets that require precision for sensitive site exploitation purposes. The USSOF decreases its footprint over time, reaching a steady state of a SOCFWD-Afghanistan to maintain a regional CT platform in the country for national interests. In coordination with the U.S. Embassy, Afghan service members increase attendance in U.S. military schools beyond the tactical level such as Ranger School, Flight School, and Air Assault School. However, the exchanges will place more emphasis on Professional Military Education, such as Basic Officer Leader Courses, Captain's Career Course, Intermediate Level Education, and the Senior Service College. The U.S. Embassy in Kabul executes peace time governance operations.

As discussed above, the government's ability to provide basic services and protect the population establishes favorable conditions for an emerging nation. The government can effectively communicate and exert influence over 80 percent of the population, through widespread media and communications platforms. In this environment, the population's trust in the government reinforces their desire to actively participate and promote the democratic process. With decreased levels of violence, GIRoA can address issues beyond security such as women's rights and healthcare. Afghan youth continue to travel abroad to pursue educational opportunities but return upon completion to further promote growth within their communities, stemming the current "brain drain" trend. Afghanistan's steady increase in standard of living attracts immigrants and refugees from other countries. A greater sense of an Afghan identity emerges, spurred by unity on topics such as inhibiting foreign meddling.

Best Case Future: Prosperous Nation

In a "prosperous nation" environment, Afghanistan as a thriving democracy is a flourishing regional partner and a contributing member to the greater international community. It stands as a strong example of democracy and economic stability in Central Asia.

In this future, GIRoA is a well-established and functioning democracy that other tribal nations look to as an example of how to balance the nuance between centralization and decentralization. The Taliban successfully integrated into the political process as an independent political party. Democratic, independent, fair, and timely elections offer GIRoA legitimacy and trust from the population. Stable political parties support a functioning parliament that allows Kabul to focus on securing the long-term prosperity of Afghanistan. The government provides

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essential services to 90 percent of the population in both urban and rural areas. GIROA stands as an example of success in governance across the region.

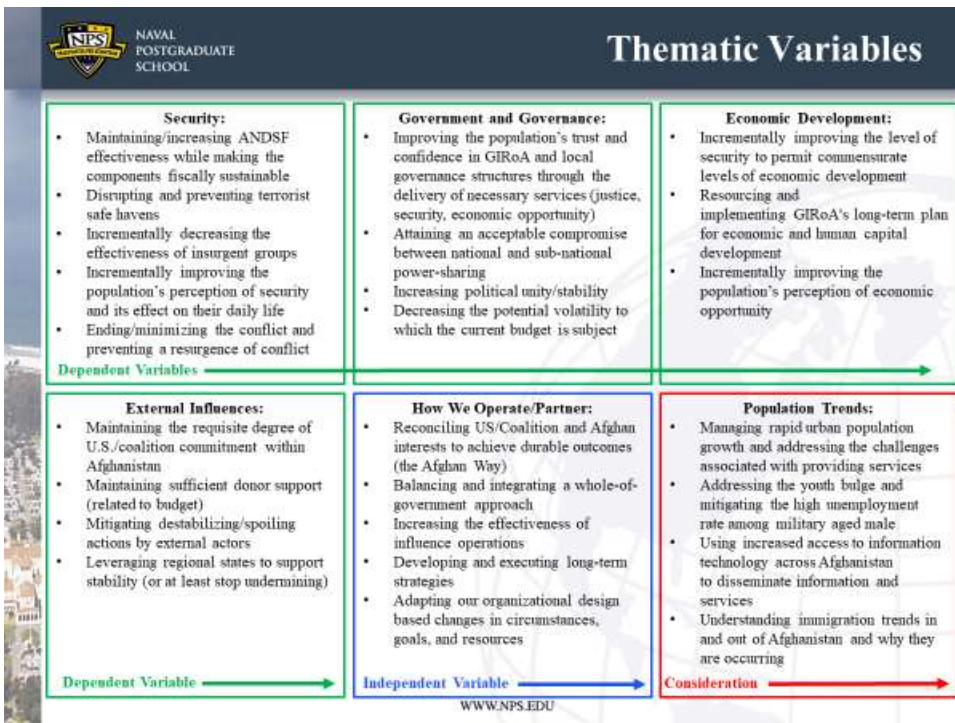
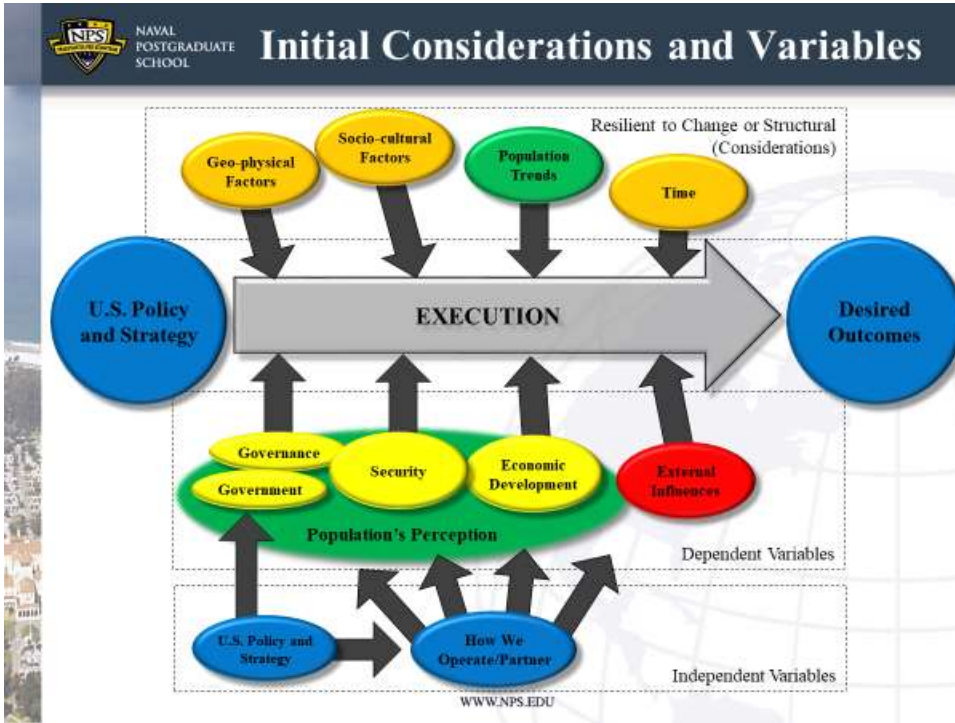
In terms of security and stability, the ANDSF drove out the remaining pockets of insurgency and extremism, leaving a stable and relatively safe country. The ANA and other aspects of the Ministry of Defense focus on external threats whereas forces from the Ministry of Interior, such as the various police forces, focus on the internal rule of law and effective policing as opposed to fighting insurgent organizations. The ASSF conduct JCET events in other countries, bolstering the SOF capabilities of its regional partners. Afghans enjoy full freedom of maneuver to travel safely across their country without fear of violence.


Economically, Afghanistan's economy is growing thanks to exports of rare minerals and a healthy agricultural industry. Improved roads allow for transregional trade with Afghan exports to Asia, Europe, and the United States. The once-dominant drug trade is now virtually non-existent. Not only does GIROA no longer require foreign economic support, but now supplies small amounts of foreign aid to other countries in the region. Specifically, it invests in the infrastructure development of its neighbors to the north to support the continued economic boom of Central Asia. Afghanistan has a diverse economy that ensures long-term prosperity and economic independence.

People in a prosperous Afghanistan fully support GIROA due to the stability and success the government spreads across the country. Rather than Afghan students traveling abroad to receive higher education, international students seek out educational opportunities in Afghanistan. Across the country, access to a minimum of high school education is universal, regardless of gender. Access to technology improves the Afghan way of life. 4G coverage (or the most recent equivalent) traverses the country, giving people access to national and international news, developments, and commerce. The population turns to the government for support and services, and little remaining support or sympathy for extremist organization exists.


From a partnership perspective, U.S. presence in the country remains limited to the embassy. USSOF conducts episodic JCETs as the ASSF builds its near-peer capability. U.S. and Afghan forces also exchange students for various professional military education courses, further strengthening the mil-to-mil relationship. Afghanistan enjoys similarly productive relationships with its neighbors such as Russia, Iran, and Pakistan. In fact, Pakistan fosters a beneficial relationship with Afghanistan as Afghanistan holds leadership in CATO. Lastly, and most importantly, U.S. forces no longer deploy to Afghanistan for combat operations but travel there for recreation and tourism.

Appendix C. Variables and Considerations



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Post-2020 USG-Afghan Challenges



Near-term

- Developing and implementing a long-term strategy and policy (10+ years)
- Decreasing foreign support's effect on budget sustainability
- Managing political and ethnic fracturing and its effects
- Transition from conflict environment to IDAD (internal defense and development)-like environment
- Taliban reconciliation and reintegration
- ANDSF restructure
- Maintaining VEO degradation
- Changing the population's perception of the environment (instilling hope)
- Decreasing corruption and patronage
- Managing the influence of regional actors—leveraging stabilizers and mitigating destabilizers

Longer-term

- Balancing national and sub-national power sharing
- Establishing acceptable degree of political representation
- Dealing with large unemployed youth population and urbanization
- Increasing national unity/identity
- Increasing economic development and investment
- Rapidly changing information communication environment

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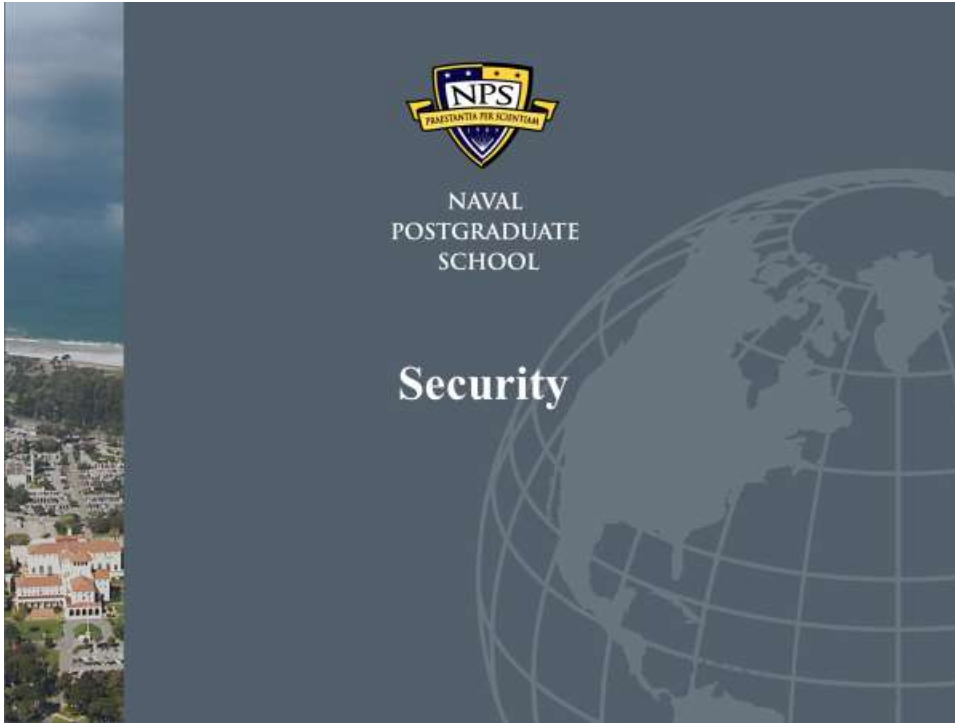
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Quick Links



- [Security](#)
- [Governance](#)
- [Economic Development](#)
- [External Influences](#)
- [How We Operate/Partner](#)
- [Population Trends](#)

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Thematic Variable: Security

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Is the ANDSF increasing or decreasing in effectiveness? Is this sustainable?</i>	The ANDSF has broken apart, leaving trained personnel unemployed in search of options to earn a living and maintain a sense of honor.	ANDSF is capable of conducting successful operations targeting domestic insurgents with the assistance of coalition air support, advisors, and logistical/material support. The ANDSF is not yet self-sustaining, though becoming more independent at the tactical level.	The ANDSF is fully capable of conducting effective unilateral operations with minimal U.S. support. The ANA is primarily focused on external threats and has established mutually beneficial relationships with its regional partners through exchanges and training events. The ANP are internally focused and support legitimate rule of law.

Considerations:

1. Ethnic/tribal identities continue to play a significant role in Afghan society. The ethnic make-up and deployment location of each ANDSF element must be a critical consideration. This consideration must be addressed in the context of each element's intended purpose and desired effects.
2. The U.S. must evaluate all programs developing ANDSF capabilities with respect to sustainability. If Afghanistan is to operate independently, it must utilize equipment it can procure and maintain without Coalition support as well as use TTPs it can unilaterally replicate.
3. The U.S. must identify a "no fail" threshold for when the U.S. must play a more active role in operations. For example, U.S. carrying out CT missions in support of U.S. national interests.
4. Solutions must address the existence and capabilities of the "hold force" maintaining ANDSF gains and preventing insurgent expansion in contested areas.

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Thematic Variable: Security

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Are VEO safe havens increasing or decreasing?</i>	VEOs have freedom of movement and are capable of mounting effective attacks against GIRoA as well as exporting violence, presenting a global threat. Afghanistan becomes a terror-planning and training ground.	VEOs primarily reside in isolated rural regions of Afghanistan, but do not control large swaths of territory. They are capable of mounting sporadic coordinated attacks targeting GIRoA, the Coalition, and the Afghan people, but are unable to effectively plan and execute operations outside of Afghanistan.	Afghanistan is untenable for VEOs to operate, and they are forced to seek safe havens elsewhere.

Considerations:

1. Aside from kinetic targeting of VEOs, potential solutions must address factors that contribute to successful recruiting by VEOs and possible tolerance by segments of the Afghan population.
2. Possible solutions must consider the sources of VEO personnel and resources. If externally influenced and supported, efforts aimed at their sources may be more effective.
3. U.S. must consider when targeting VEOs in Afghanistan becomes a national priority due to the potential of VEOs projecting threats outside of Afghanistan.

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Thematic Variable: Security

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Do insurgent groups increase or decrease in effectiveness?</i>	Insurgent groups have largely negated GIRoA/ANDSF efforts and control the vast majority of Afghanistan, to include population centers. Multiple, regional insurgent groups exert control over their respective areas, potentially devolving into tribal conflict.	Insurgent groups maintain significant presence and influence over rural areas, but are unable to challenge the existence of GIRoA. The Taliban continues to be at odds with GIRoA, and reconciliation efforts remain unproductive.	The vast majority of Afghanistan, to include rural regions, reject insurgent influence and turn to GIRoA for security. With the exception of a few pockets of insurgent activity (likely driven by crime/drugs rather than ideology), Afghanistan is free of insurgency.

Considerations:

1. Determining who and which insurgent factions hold the most power is essential for creating solutions to support reconciliation efforts as well as continued targeting. Given the lack of unity within the Taliban, a single deal is unlikely to significantly impact the security situation.
2. Understanding and degrading insurgent influence operations must remain a critical consideration for future efforts.
3. Understanding the nature of the influence insurgents have over the population in areas under their control is crucial. Do the people comply or support the insurgents out of shared ideology, fear, or ambivalence? Answering this question will guide efforts in developing solutions.

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Thematic Variable: Security

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<p><i>Does the population perceive the security situation as improving/static/deteriorating? Does the change affect their daily lives positively or negatively?</i></p>	<p>The Afghan population faces daily threats from ethnic/tribal conflicts, insurgent activity, as well as crossfire between GIROA and its challengers. Afghans are focused on survival.</p>	<p>The Afghan people continue to be affected by the ongoing war, though are capable of living an isolated life in their rural villages with the scaling back of coalition presence and reduction in combat operations.</p>	<p>The Afghan people are able to conduct daily life and travel throughout Afghanistan without a reasonable fear of falling victim to violence. The Afghans view the security apparatus as legitimate and trust in its effectiveness.</p>

Considerations:

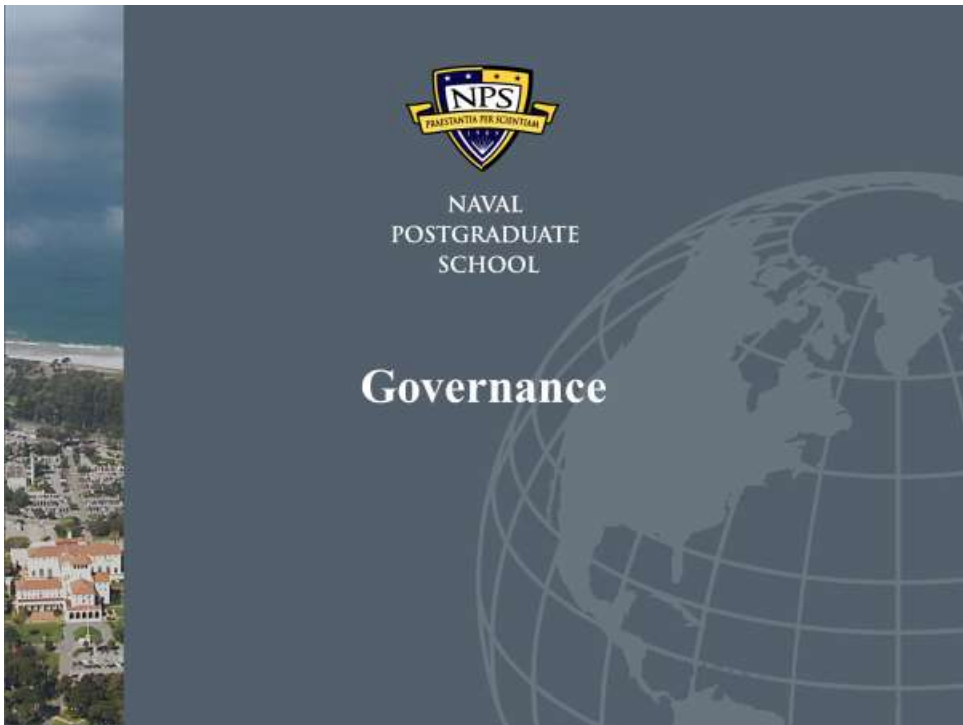
1. Potential solutions should consider the desired daily lives for each segment of the population to guide efforts. For instance, a subsistence farmer in a rural region may not be as affected by insurgent activity or GIROA efforts as the Afghan fearful of traveling to a population center for work. Efforts must be prioritized to achieve the greatest strategic effects.
2. GIROA should clearly and continuously communicate security efforts and successes to the population in line with the established narrative.
3. The ethnic/tribal identities of the population should be considered when determining perception of the security situation. Trends regarding certain ethnicities feeling better or worse about security may inform implementation of security solutions.


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Governance





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Thematic Variable: Governance

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<p><i>Does the population become more or less satisfied with the government's provision of critical services (justice, security, economic opportunity)?</i></p>	<p>The population considers central government illegitimate and is completely dissatisfied with Central Government's provision of services. They look only to local powerbrokers to provide services. This creates increased jockeying for power and resources at the local level.</p>	<p>The population is moderately dissatisfied with the level of services provided. The government's ability to provide services is relegated to Kabul and the regional capitals. Beyond that, the local power brokers provide services and jockey for the limited government resources.</p>	<p>The government provides the necessary resources and incrementally expands the level of resources it is able to provide.</p>

Considerations:

1. Government legitimacy is tied to the equitable distribution and delivery of *necessary* services (justice, accountability, and security).
2. "Afghans are the most pragmatic people in the world" (Barfield). They will align with whomever the local power broker is and will turn to the most expedient governance mechanism for delivery of services—insurgent, warlord, or central government.
3. Values, interests, and priorities vary by region and ethnicity, making centralized, 'one size fits all' policies difficult to legislate and implement.
4. Increasing urbanization presents both challenge and opportunity. It requires increased resource requirements for governing municipal entities, but it also consolidates populations making service delivery easier.
5. Reforms and evidence of progress must be effectively and continuously communicated to the population to influence its perception of the government.
6. Even the most benign reform policies are susceptible to ethnically-based politicization (e.g. electronic ID cards).

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Thematic Variable: Governance

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<p><i>Is the Afghan government able to find an acceptable balance between decentralization and centralization (i.e. National and sub-national power-sharing)?</i></p>	<p>Either excessive centralization of power in Kabul, or excessive decentralization in the local communities, where Kabul has no control or influence and is beholden to warlords or insurgent organizations.</p>	<p>Kabul controls a majority of the resources and power. However, the central government compromises enough with regional power brokers and insurgent organizations to satisfy their minimum requirements without resorting to violence to achieve their interests, except in rare cases.</p>	<p>Kabul finds an acceptable level of compromise and sub-national power-sharing. Neither side has everything they want, but the compromise is benefiting everyone, so actors are reticent to upend the agreement. Changes are made via political mechanisms within the rule of law.</p>

Considerations:

1. Afghanistan's regional diversity (terrain, demographics and external actors) creates disparate interests, priorities, and power dynamics that are difficult to reconcile with singular national policies. Many academics suggest some form of federalism may be more effective than the current approach, but this would diminish the central government's power, making it less-desirable choice for GfRoA.
2. The current centralized form of government creates a 'winner takes all' scenario that Afghanistan's diverse groups fear. Greater decentralization of power could change the zero sum nature of national politics by distributing political competition across the political spectrum, vice concentrating at the national level.
3. Traditional and 'modern' (or centralized) forms of governance exist simultaneously in Afghanistan. Rural populations often turn to informal governance mechanisms because the central government's presence is limited or non-existent. Academics argue that integrating these informal institutions into the formal structure could have positive effects on dispute resolution at the local level.
4. Kabul's central ministries retain authority for appointments, budgets, resources, and revenue generation, limiting the speed of progress and the ability of district and provincial administrators to execute service delivery (Barfield)
5. Geography and terrain presents a massive challenges to managing and delivering services and/or resources to outlying regions—supply-push (centralized), demand-pull (decentralized), or hybrid (McCormick).

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 **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL** **Thematic Variable Example: Governance**

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Is political unity/stability increasing or decreasing in Afghanistan?</i>	Ethnic and regional interests are vastly different. Coupled with an unwillingness to cooperate and fear of losing out, these disparities prohibit any possibility instate policies that allow for forward progress.	Ethnic and regional interests remain strongly divided, but compromises are found on essential issues, such as security and peace and reconciliation.	Federalism—Ethnic and regional interests are met because the provincial and district centers are granted the authority to enact sub-national legislation, while the central government focuses on protecting constitutional rights, inter-regional domestic issues, and foreign policy issues.

Considerations:

1. “There is no purely military solution to Afghanistan.” – GEN Nicholson (DoD News)
2. Afghanistan is divided regionally, in terms of terrain, demographics and external actors. This creates disparate interests, priorities, and power dynamics that are difficult to reconcile with unified national policies. Many academics suggest a form of federalism may be more effective than the current approach, but this would diminish the central government’s power, making it an unlikely choice.
3. If the central government remains unwilling to compromise, sub-national challenges to Kabul (e.g. Muhammed Atta Noor) will continue to worsen, potentially leading to increased violence and full-scale civil war. The point is to keep these challenges to authority within the political arena—controlled by an agreed upon set of rules—and prevent elites from using violence to pursue their interests.
4. Even the most benign reform policies are susceptible to ethnically-based politicization (e.g. electronic ID cards).
5. U.S. government elements should be aware of, or leverage, the role they play—wittingly or unwittingly—in these inter-factional political disputes.

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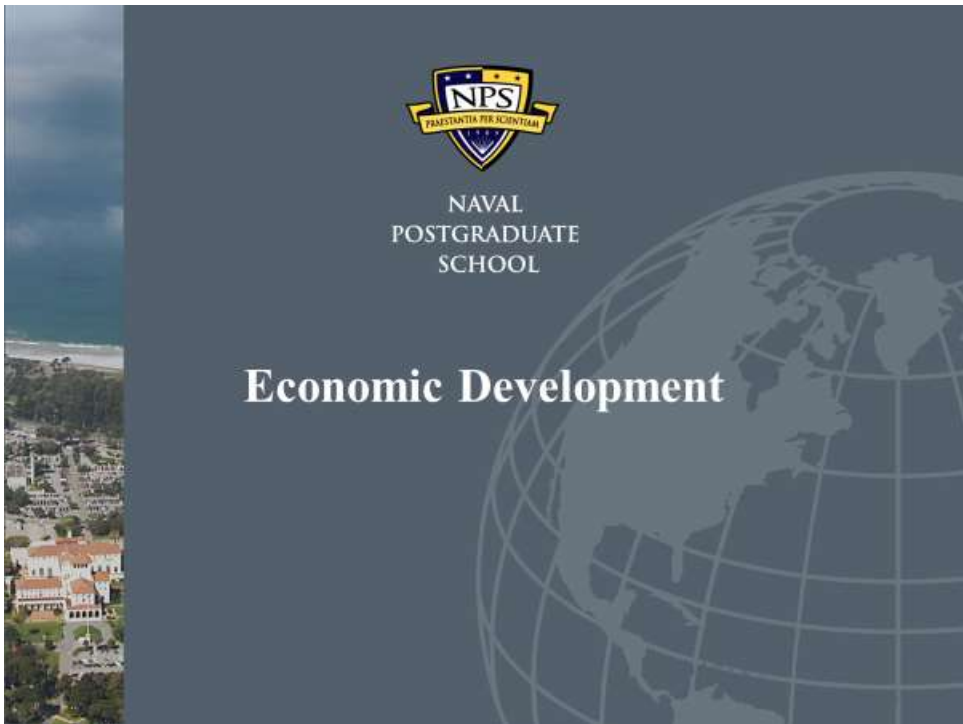
 **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL** **Thematic Variable Example: Governance**


Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Is the central government’s budget sustainable and sufficient to execute its critical initiatives?</i>	Foreign aid ceases too quickly which begins the financial collapse of the central government. OR Foreign aid drops, but sustains a bare minimum budget. The level keeps the lights on in Kabul, but government spending will be unsustainable within a few years.	The government receives foreign aid and collects enough revenue to maintain the bare minimum of services. It must prioritize its efforts, but financial limitations are a staunch impediment to any visible progress.	Foreign aid drops consistently, but remains at relatively high levels to permit progress and development. The level of continued foreign aid is predicated Afghanistan’s ability to produce results and maintain accountability of its expenditures.


Considerations:

1. The Afghan government, specifically the security sector, is heavily reliant on foreign aid. GIRoA recognizes this problem, but remains exceptionally vulnerable to a sharp withdrawal in foreign financial support.
2. Donor aid is increasingly tied to anti-corruption and budget reforms intended to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of spending. The Afghan Measure for Accountability and Transparency (AMANAT) is intended to address this.
3. Plans and projects, both new and legacy, must recognize (as many already do) the shrinking nature of the government’s budget. This is especially relevant when considering force structure and capabilities of the Afghan Security Forces. According to a recent SIGAR report, ANDSF funding has decreased approximately \$60 million each year since 2013. In FY17, GIRoA provided roughly 11 percent of ANDSF Funding.

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Thematic Variable: Economic Development			
Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
Does the level of security result in increased or decreased economic development?	Security along roads and trade routes is non-existent and is primarily controlled by the Taliban or warlords who extort the population and drives down economic development	Security is limited to major roadways and LOCs, promoting economic development in major cities; however rural Afghanistan economically secluded due to GIROA inability to provide security that far out and Taliban control of those areas, making it difficult for them to achieve any sort of economic growth or prosperity	Security exists along major LOCs and less traveled rural roads, providing freedom of movement is over most of Afghanistan, enabling free trade and access to commodities and promoting economic prosperity. Additionally, the increased security promotes trans-regional trade, further stabilizing the Afghan economy
Considerations:			
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Potential solutions should include informing the population of the security measures being taken to secure their economic interest in their region, province, district, and village. 2. GIROA should prioritize resources to secure LOCs, trade routes, economic strong holds, and critical villages. They cannot secure everything, but should focus on areas vital to their economic development. 3. GIROA should consider dedicating portions of its security force to provide security to economic development areas such as mines, gas sites, etc. Demonstrating their ability to protect these areas could potentially attract more foreign investors. 			
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Thematic Variable: Economic Development

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Does the government plan for and support inclusive economic development?</i>	GIROA lacks the resources to provide any plan or action for economic development programs. All resources are focused on security threat. Limited resources are dedicated to maintaining degrading infrastructure in Kabul.	As per the guidance and stipulations attached to foreign aid, GIROA develops programs for economic development that include rural and urban programs, but lack the large scale effects required to generate any economic self-reliance.	GIROA prospers economically by creating policy revenue generation programs, such as small business loans, subsidizing etc. Additionally, they reinvest in the economy to develop economic inclusiveness and equality of all Afghans

Considerations:

1. Understand the role that urbanization is playing on economic development, consider how to mitigate the brain drain and slow urbanization to prevent an inability of the rural population to support the urban population with food.
2. GIROA economic development plans should be directed at both urban and rural areas. Subsidizing certain goods in Afghanistan could bolster the economy in other sectors.
3. Understanding how power brokers are influencing economic development programs or attempting to use the economy to prevent certain parts of the population from gaining elevated social status.
4. All economic development plans should be comprehensive and realistic enough to endure a minimum of four years.

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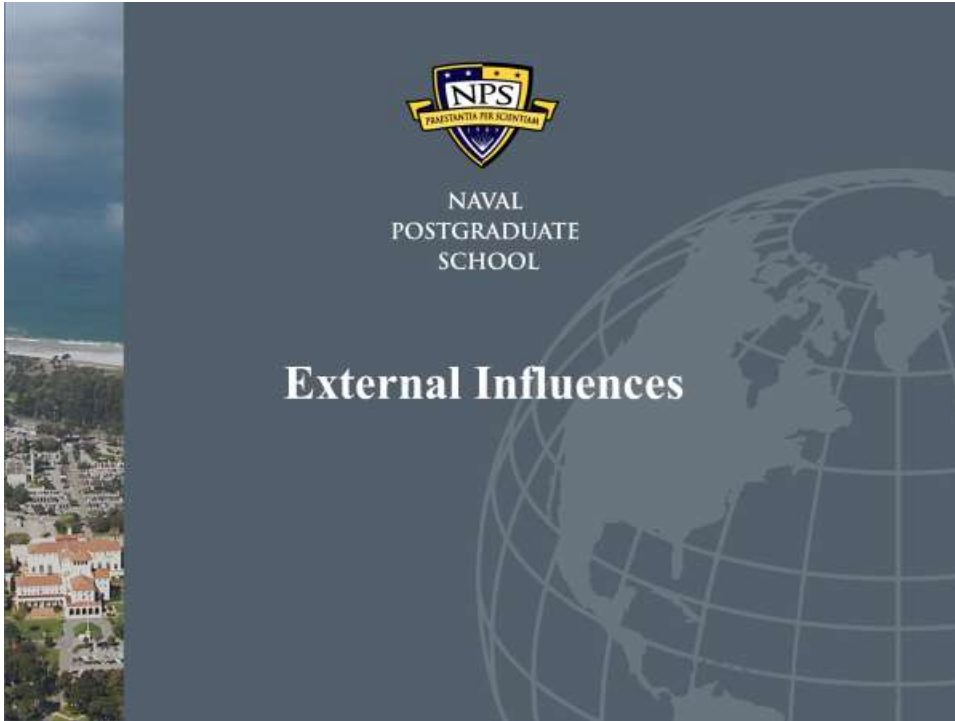
Thematic Variable: Economic Development

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Does the population's perception of economic opportunity increase or decrease?</i>	Due to GIROA's inability to provide any economic access to the population, the people are reliant almost exclusively on the black market.	Economic opportunity exists for those with access to patronage networks and/or can broker deals with those in power, furthering the polarization of wealth and power in Afghanistan. Remote areas rely on the black market.	Access to government programs promotes economic opportunity across the country. Newly created businesses, increased access to goods and commodities, and increase in jobs further economic opportunity for those that previously lacked access to it.

Considerations:

1. Possible solutions should consider goods and services required by various villages and populations throughout Afghanistan. Does the population have access to the goods and services they need within the immediate area where they live?
2. GIROA must consider how it demonstrates and messages to the population that they are working to develop economic opportunities. How does the population know what the government is doing, offering, etc.?

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Thematic Variable: External Influences

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Does the level of foreign commitment (U.S. and coalition) increase, decrease or stay the same?</i>	The failure of the Afghan government has forced the U.S. -led coalition to disband. Coalition commitment in the form of funding and military support has dried to virtually zero. Diplomatically, most former coalition countries maintain a minimal presence in highly fortified embassies - a last ditch effort to not completely walk away from Afghanistan.	The continued strategic stalemate leaves the U.S. and the coalition committed to Afghanistan, but tired and on the verge of walking away. Financially, most coalition countries still support Afghanistan, but with restraint. Coalition forces remain, but at a level just high enough to maintain the stalemate; U.S. forces continue to do most of the heavy lifting. Diplomatically, the coalition supports GiRoA, but a decade and a half of fighting has cost much in terms of blood and treasure. Support remains, but its future is uncertain	The U.S. and coalition are committed to a stable Afghanistan, but as allies looking to partner with a fledgling Afghanistan rather than prop up a failing government. Financially, most are willing to support a growing economy, hoping for a return on their investment. Military commitment remains, but as advisors and trainers. Diplomatically, coalition governments are unilaterally supportive of GiRoA. The relative success across the country has vindicated the commitment over the years, and the U.S. coalition is committed to ensuring long-term Afghan stability.

Considerations:

1. U.S. and coalition commitment is not infinite.
2. Success must be seen as an achievable goal.
3. If failure seems inevitable, most will do all they can to minimize embarrassment on the international stage.
4. If success seems inevitable, most will do what they can to rally around a burgeoning Afghanistan.

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Thematic Variable: External Influences

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Does Afghanistan retain the international community's political attention (priority)?</i>	The international community has deemed Afghanistan a failed state. The lack of a legitimate government has forced all international power brokers to withdraw any legitimate attention toward Afghanistan. The country is essentially isolated from the international community, as it was under the Taliban. The situation is similar to Yemen: too unstable to support, yet too dangerous to turn a blind eye.	Afghanistan retains a level of disdainful international interest. It is seen as a very risky problem to tackle that is on the verge of failure. Most international stakeholders are comfortable standing on the sidelines to let the U.S. succeed or fail in Afghanistan. Similar to countries like Somalia, Afghanistan is on the brink of instability, receiving minimal support to keep it afloat.	Afghanistan is a priority in the sense that the international community sees it as a success around which it can rally. Its burgeoning economy is seen as a political opportunity to not only foster international good will, but to spread influence in Central Asia. Similar to Niger, Afghanistan is standing on its own and succeeding, but with support from the international community.

Considerations:

1. The international community does not want a failed Afghanistan.
2. Malign actors do not want a failed Afghanistan or a U.S. success story.
3. ISIS-K and Sunni extremism are a concern for all.
4. Changing dynamics of international trade create economic opportunities.
5. Refugees and illicit drug trade present international security and fiscal concerns.
6. Changing dynamics are predicated on DoS diplomatic efforts; any actions must be integrated into larger regional strategies.

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Thematic Variable: External Influences

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Pakistan: Are regional actors supporting (or, at a minimum not undermining) efforts to achieve relative stability in Afghanistan or are regional actors continuing to destabilize Afghanistan and undermine the Afghan government?</i>	Fully supportive of the Taliban and satisfied with an isolated and unstable Afghanistan in which it indirectly wields sufficient political influence to ensure strategic depth and deny India a regional hegemony. However, it is also wary of further destabilizing Afghanistan to the extent that Afghan extremism will destabilize Pakistan.	Continues to feign support for the U.S. and coalition externally, while fanning the flames of U.S. disdain internally. Claims to support the legitimate government of Afghanistan, but undermines its success and stability by supporting the Taliban.	Sees Afghanistan as a regional peer, but also as a threat due to its success and U.S. partnership. Wary of potential Afghan-Indian partnerships and the implications it will have for Pakistan. Willing to lessen its meddling, but also stands ready to reengage the Taliban should they resurge.

Considerations:

1. Pakistani support of the Taliban.
2. U.S. foreign aid to Pakistan.
3. Opportunities for partnership with Pakistan to target the Tehrik-i-Taliban (TTP).
4. Extremism spreading across the Afghan-Pakistani border.

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Thematic Variable: External Influences

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Russia and Iran: Are regional actors supporting (or, at a minimum not undermining) efforts to achieve relative stability in Afghanistan or are regional actors continuing to destabilize Afghanistan and undermine the Afghan government?</i>	While a U.S. embarrassment on the global stage is seen as a victory for Russia and Iran, neither see a failed Afghanistan as a net positive. Both fear extremism and terrorism will spill across their borders from Afghanistan. For Russia, the threat is less direct thanks to the insulation provided by CAS, but the drug trade from Afghanistan also complicates the matter.	Both Russia and Iran are pushing to destabilize, but not to the extent of total Afghan failure. A U.S. loss in the region, or a lack of a U.S. military presence, would be beneficial to both, but a terrorist safe haven would not. Russia continues to support the Taliban in the north under the guise of stopping extremism, while Iran complicates the matter by supporting reconstruction in the west, but simultaneously undermining GiRoA through proxy support of the Taliban.	Both Russia and Iran are cautious of the U.S. and coalition success in the region, but are willing to partner with a fledgling Afghanistan simply to stymie U.S. influence. The success of GiRoA and the failure of the Taliban have forced both to discontinue support of any remaining Taliban. Both also see Afghanistan as a potential future for trade across CAS and hope to build relationships that allow for future economic expansion.

Considerations:

1. Preventing the spread of ISIS-K into Russia's borders and containing the Afghan drug trade are both priorities for Russia.
2. A whole-of-government approach is required to influence Russia to combat ISIS-K and Taliban drug trade in the north of Afghanistan, rather than covertly supporting the Taliban.
3. Iran fears the spread of ISIS-K into its borders from Afghanistan.
4. The spread of Sunni extremism is a threat to the Iran's way of life.
5. The U.S. (and SOJTF-A indirectly) could encourage or allow Iran to target ISIS-K and other Sunni extremists if they encroach upon western Afghanistan.

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Thematic Variable: External Influences

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>CAS and China: Are regional actors supporting (or, at a minimum not undermining) efforts to achieve relative stability in Afghanistan or are regional actors continuing to destabilize Afghanistan and undermine the Afghan government?</i>	Both CAS and China see Afghanistan as a threat to regional stability, but not to the extent that they are willing to try and affect any positive change in the region. The focus is ensuring the border with Afghanistan is secure to prevent as much illicit activity across the region as possible.	Concerned by a fragile Afghanistan, CAS sees Afghanistan as threat to regional stability. Yet, it is caught between promoting Afghan success and indirectly supporting Russian regional objectives. China, similarly, will moderately push to stabilize Afghanistan, but with very limited effort and with its own self-interest in mind - opportunism. Yet, both also see Afghanistan as ripe with potential for economic opportunity, should GiRoA succeed.	A stable and successful Afghanistan presents economic opportunities for both CAS and China. For CAS, Afghanistan is at a geographic crossroads between the Middle East, CAS, and the far East. It is hopeful to allow Afghanistan to take the lead and bring stability and economic opportunity to the region. For China, a burgeoning Afghanistan is an opportunity for economic exploitation. Akin to its efforts in Africa, it is investing in Afghan infrastructure, hoping to lay the first tracks of future development.

Considerations:

1. Security partnerships to prevent illicit trade and activities across central Asian borders.
2. CAS SOF and ASSF training exchange opportunities to build capacity across the region.
3. Improved relationship with SOCFWD-CAS and other USSOF efforts across the region.
4. China could open access to its professional military education for ASSF officers.
5. U.S. targeting of the Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP) opens potential for partnerships with China.

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Thematic Variable: External Influences

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>India: Are regional actors supporting (or, at a minimum not undermining) efforts to achieve relative stability in Afghanistan or are regional actors continuing to destabilize Afghanistan and undermine the Afghan government?</i>	India sees Afghanistan as a threat to regional stability, but also as battlespace Pakistan could leverage in a hypothetical conflict. However, India is unable to affect Afghanistan due to Taliban control and geographic separation.	India is looking to increase its partnership with and support of Afghanistan, but is concerned about the tensions this will cause with Pakistan. Yet, India is also concerned with extremism spreading from Afghanistan into Pakistan and forcing Pakistan into a desperate position.	India sees Afghanistan as a viable partner and a way to apply strategic pressure on its traditional enemy - Pakistan. It is partners with and supports Afghanistan, claiming regional good will, but with its own self-interests in mind. India is increasing its military partnerships and economic support for Afghanistan.

Considerations:


1. Opportunities for Indian-Afghan military partnerships: training exchanges, professional military education, military equipment sales, etc.
2. Tense relationship between India and Pakistan and implications of an Indian-Afghan partnerships.
3. India's relationship with Iran could be leveraged to stymie Iranian efforts to undermine the U.S. in GIROA.

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How We Operate/Partner

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Thematic Variable: How We Operate/Partner

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Does the U.S. and coalition advisory partnership support 'the Afghan way'?</i>	No Balance: Afghanistan's priorities and policies are forced to align with U.S./coalition priorities due to compliance and funding.	Balanced Afghan Way: Equilibrium on managing domestic policies/priorities with external partners, as Afghanistan is still dependent on external support.	Completely Afghan Way: Afghanistan favors domestic policies/priorities above partners', as it is an independent nation that is not dependent on external support.

Considerations:

1. With international donors' financial, political, and monetary support to the government of Afghanistan, decisions are often made with priorities and agendas not in congruence with Afghanistan's long-term best interest in mind.
2. Coalition partners must allow the current Afghanistan leadership to project influence over their population by endorsing Afghan initiatives that support the Afghan way.
3. Coalition interests are important, but should not overshadow the Afghan way and impede Afghanistan's sovereignty.
4. Is there a rising leader within the Afghan government who has a vision for the Afghan way?

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Thematic Variable: How We Operate/Partner

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Is the U.S.'s whole-of-government approach integrated and effective or disjointed and ineffective?</i>	No Guidance: The U.S. does not have a plan or structure to integrate a whole-of-government approach to advise the Afghan government.	DoD Led: U.S. military led as the lead agency in Afghanistan, responsible for integrating DoD and DoS operations in a whole-of-government approach.	DoS Led: DoS (USEMB) led as the lead agency in Afghanistan, responsible for integrating DoD and DoS operations in a whole-of-government approach.

Considerations:

1. The only way to synchronize a whole-of-government approach is to have the entire U.S. government enterprise mobilized towards a common goal.
2. How can/will the DoD transition control back to the DoS?
3. Is Afghanistan still a priority for the DoS and other U.S. government entities besides the DoD?
4. Can coalition partners (NATO) provide a whole-of-government advisory package?

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Thematic Variable: How We Operate/Partner

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Does the effectiveness of U.S. influence operations (to all stakeholders) increase, decrease, or remain the same?</i>	No Information Operations: Influence operations do not exist across the board (U.S., coalition, and Afghan). Anti-GIRoA information operations are effective in messaging.	IO Balance: IO operations (lethal and non-lethal) are fully integrated by the U.S. (DoD/DoS) to achieve desired effects. Afghan conducts non-lethal messaging to promote the government's priorities.	IO Success: IO operations (lethal and non-lethal) are planned, organized, and executed by the Afghan government. These messages are nested across the spectrum of the government to promote GIRoA.

Considerations:

1. Information operation is a high risk and high reward line of effort. Accuracy matters, as the population's trust and confidence in the coalition and Afghan government is on the line every time.
2. Can the Afghan government project information operations without being everywhere? If so, through what medium? (E.g. local leaders, social media, television, newspapers, etc.).
3. Messages require acceptance by varying ethnic and tribal groups. Very few messages will apply to the entire country, so decentralization of messages that are nested at the national level is critical.

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Thematic Variable: How We Operate/Partner

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Is the U.S.'s strategy in Afghanistan characterized as long-term and consistent or short-term with frequent change?</i>	Time-Based: Strategies that last 12-18 months tied to political schedules, agendas, and funding.	R4 + S: Long-term approach/strategy, conditions-based.	Reversed: Roles are reversed, where Afghanistan has a strategy for U.S. involvement in Afghanistan.

Considerations:

1. The U.S. government must signal, through both verbal and non-verbal actions, a long-term investment in Afghanistan. These signals will encourage coalition partners to further invest and malign actors to divest from the situation.
2. Investments across the whole-of-government approach: economic, political, military, etc.
3. A small footprint is more sustainable in the long-term, but when can we transition?

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Thematic Variable: How We Operate/Partner

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>Is the U.S.'s organizational design in Afghanistan appropriate based on changes in circumstances, goals, and resources?</i>	Keeping the Status Quo: Despite changes in conditions and resources, U.S. elements generally keep the same organizational design, which is characterized by inter-organizational stove-piping, overreliance on the military instrument, disjointed goals and strategies, and frequent turnover in personnel. Neither DoS or the DoD are capable or willing to take on the challenge of governance advising at the provincial level and below. U.S. elements are increasingly retracting toward Kabul.	Shared Purpose and Approach: U.S. entities have a shared vision for goals and strategy in Afghanistan. There is increased inter-organizational integration at the tactical and operational levels (not simply the HQ's in Kabul). While each organization still maintains a number of 'pet projects,' the degree of unified action is significantly increased. As a result of this integration, DoS and DoD are increasingly aware of the interrelated events within political and security environments resulting in increased effectiveness.	Full Joint and IA integration: The U.S. forms Unified Action Task Forces aligned with Afghanistan's regions to synchronize the application of the DIME instruments. Personnel and functions are added and removed as requirements dictate (shedding legacy items). Based on prioritization of regions, the U.S. footprint expands physically, which requires an increased risk tolerance, or by leveraging indigenous networks; both of which provide an increased degree of situational awareness that drives U.S. efforts.

Considerations:

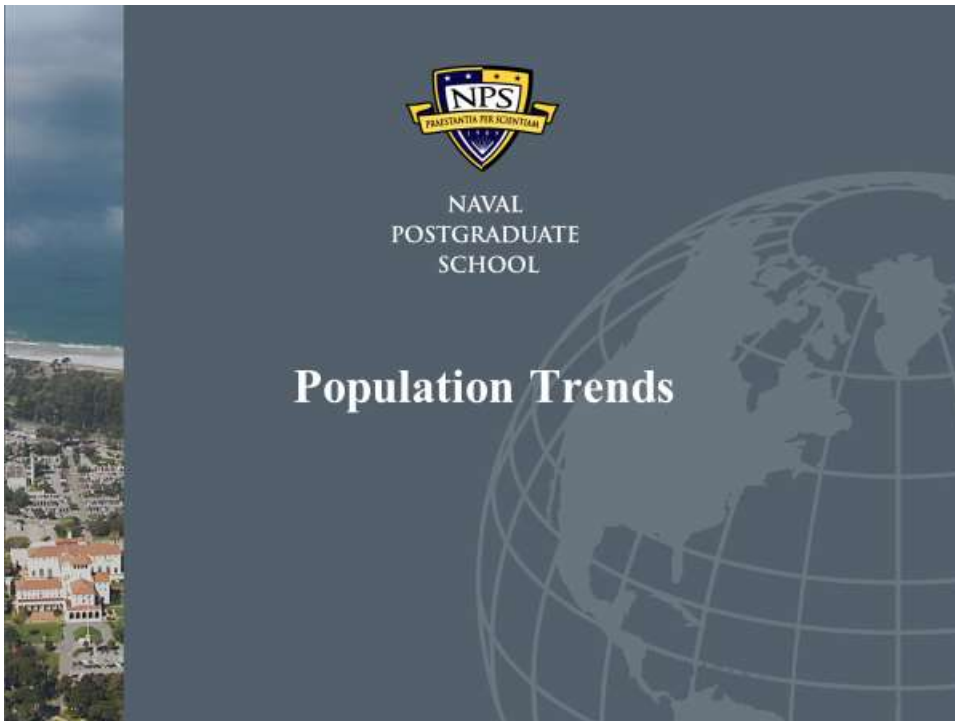
1. Communicating a shared purpose (policy) and strategy, and inculcating a shared organizational vision and culture. Applies to SOJTF-A and the broader joint, interagency, intergovernmental, and multinational (JIIM) network.
2. Maintaining a relative degree of continuity and employing the 'right' personnel.
3. Forcing unified action in Afghanistan will likely require White House intervention or Congressional legislation to formally mediate the division of labor between DoS/DoD.
4. Congressional funding will only decrease from here. As a result, the U.S. will have to organize and operate with increasing efficiency.


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Population Trends



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Thematic Variable: Other Trends

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>How does GIROA manage the rapid urban population growth and the challenges with the expansion of people in its city centers (the trend does not seem to be stopping, thus the fiscal and resource requirements will continue to increase)?</i>	<p>Afghan government is unable to provide security, healthcare, and services for increased urban population and rural areas.</p> <p>Effect: the population loses trust in the government, moves back to rural areas, immigrates to other countries, and perhaps becomes more susceptible to malign influence.</p>	<p>Afghan government is marginally able to provide for the population (prior to the urban growth). Support systems are growing with increased migration. The government requires external aid and expertise to support service industry. Imports and exports are growing with Afghan GDP growing at approximately 5 percent annually.</p>	<p>The government can provide services to at minimum 90 percent of populace. Urban and rural areas are fully connected with goods and services. Imports and exports are growing with Afghan GDP growing at approximately 10 percent annually.</p>

Considerations:

1. The DoD must coordinate with USAID and DoS to implement atypical DoD urbanization programs, i.e. affordable housing, economic development, infrastructure development and services.
2. Solutions must address the reintegration of Afghans returning back to Afghanistan, displaced personnel, and growth rates of urban populations.
3. Considerations should also address the booming Kabul economy, increased number of residents and cars, and infrastructure required to maintain a clean and healthy environment.
4. SOJTF-A solutions should focus on SOF train, advise, and assist security tasks.

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Thematic Variable Other Trends

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<i>How does GIROA manage the youth bulge coupled with an already high unemployment rate, setting the conditions for increasing disaffection with the government and a greater population susceptible to recruitment from insurgent organizations.?</i>	<p>A high unemployment rate results in the youth being recruited by Taliban and other VEOs. The Taliban and VEOs are still influencing a radical Islamist education. The Taliban are recruiting youth and locals to fight and produce poppy. The local populace is becoming displaced and/or migrating out of the country.</p>	<p>GIROA is able to provide some youth with education and jobs. Educational and employment agencies are receiving greater accreditation and recognition. Students are attending schools at higher rates. The unemployment rate continues to drop (below 25 percent). The Taliban and VEOs are gradually reconciling/neutralized and participating in traditional educational and employment systems.</p>	<p>The Afghan government has a fully established traditional educational system in all areas of the country. High School graduation rates are above 80 percent. The unemployment rate is below 15 percent. The majority of Taliban and VEOs are reconciled/neutralized and participating in traditional educational and employment systems.</p>

Considerations:

1. The DoD must coordinate with GIROA, NGOs, and DoS to address this issue.
2. SOJTF-A may focus creative considerations on targeting radical extremist groups and violent extremist organizations.
3. Lethal targeting of youth may result in the general public questioning the moral/ethical/legal rules of engagement targeting youths.
4. Negative news publicity of youths killed in combat could cause the populace to turn on coalition forces along with the general public losing support for the war.

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Thematic Variable: Other Trends

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<p><i>How does increased access to technology affect dissemination of information at greater rates of speed to more locations throughout Afghanistan and the rest of the world? (There is a significant disparity in the government's ability to disseminate information, as opposed to the Taliban and other insurgent groups.)</i></p>	<p>The majority of Afghans have access to information technology, but the Taliban and VEOs control access and monitoring. The Taliban and VEOs' information operations and monitoring is much better than the government.</p>	<p>Information technology access and network coverage covers the urban areas and extends to rural areas with some network work limitations. Information and influence operations are generally controlled by coalition forces. The Taliban and VEOs are able to access Afghan public networks.</p>	<p>Everyone has access to information technology, which is accurate and transparent from official government channels.</p>

Considerations:

1. Understanding what coalition forces have the technological expertise, means, and methods for implementing a unified influence operation campaign is essential.
2. Creative solutions may need to contract private corporations for technology devices and infrastructure development.

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Thematic Variable: Other Trends

Variable	Unacceptable	Minimum Acceptable	Best Case
<p><i>Is immigration into and emigration out of Afghanistan increasing or decreasing and for what reasons (good or bad)?</i></p>	<p>Terrorist influx, large internally displaced persons (IDP) camps, exodus of human capital, high unemployment rates. VEO safe havens are prevalent; borders are extremely porous. People do not feel safe traveling outside their local areas at night. Coalition forces are restricted to air mobility.</p>	<p>Government has control over border security. People are able to travel throughout the country without fear of attack or retribution. People are staying, and Afghans are returning to their homes from other countries. VEO's safe havens are isolated and have little to zero ability to conduct an attack or expand influence.</p>	<p>Borders are secured and the population is satisfied with current security levels. The government is able to deny the Taliban and VEOs safe havens. There is an increase in the number of tourist/education visas, work permits.</p>

Considerations:

1. Signs of government support would indicate a return of Afghans from other countries and reintegration to society.
2. Considerations must address border security, IDP location security band reintegration to local areas, and freedom of mobility through out the region.
3. Return/reintegration considerations would also have to address increased demand on urban centers services, healthcare, and labor markets.
4. Considerations would have to leverage USAID, DoS, and foreign aid to support legalized reintegration efforts.

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Appendix D. Creative Solutions

While considerations assist in understanding the complex nature of Afghanistan, creative solutions based on these same considerations help to develop innovative ways to shape the future environment. As such, the team developed a list of creative options for tackling problems across the spectrum of operations in Afghanistan. The team divided its results into two sections. First, based on the current needs of SOJTF-A, the team provided refined analysis on creative solutions related to Taliban reconciliation, conflict prevention (reintegration), Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) transformation, and influence operations (IO) via a coherent narrative. These specific solutions, and the challenges they aim to solve, are especially key to ensuring long-term stability in Afghanistan. The second section lists additional solutions based on the variables and considerations discussed in the report: external influences, governance, how “we” operate, how “we” partner, security, and other influence operations concepts. Some of these solutions provide options for or nuance to the more developed solutions. While the latter section remains less developed than the former, all solutions the team explored may prove valuable for framing SOF, or broader U.S., campaign design in Afghanistan.

Developed Creative Solutions

Conflict Resolution in Afghanistan

As the United States continues to commit resources to Afghanistan and shift its focus to a conditions-based approach rather than adhering to a defined timeline, it simultaneously seeks an end to hostilities. For the United States to responsibly reduce support to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) without risk of the central government collapsing or violent extremist organizations (VEOs) freely utilizing Afghanistan as a safe haven, an acceptable level of stability must exist. Until the Taliban and GIROA reach a settlement to end hostilities, though, stability is not likely. More than sixteen years of war has demonstrated the infeasibility of achieving a military victory over an Afghan insurgency is accustomed to resisting occupying forces. A political settlement with the Taliban is the most viable option for moving the nation towards peace and stability.

The Current Environment

The Taliban that GIROA and its partners face today is not the same organization it was in 2001. Intelligence and research indicate the Taliban has become increasingly fractured while the organization has fatigued from the relentless pressure of the Afghan government and its coalition partners. The current emir, Malawi Haibatullah Akhundzada, is struggling to lead the Taliban as a unified organization and exert authority over regional elements, such as the Mansour network,

that are internally vying for power.⁷⁶ With the rising intervention of Iran and Russia through the provision of money and arms to willing Taliban factions, elements are becoming increasingly independent, minimizing their reliance on funds centrally dispersed by the Taliban leadership.⁷⁷ The acceptance of support by some factions only widens the rift with those unwilling to cooperate with Afghanistan's historical adversaries. Varying ideologies continue to be a source of internal conflict as some elements adopt more mainstream and moderate beliefs, while other disillusioned members radicalize further, some joining the ranks of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria – Khorasan (ISIS-K).⁷⁸ Though the Taliban may have existed in such a state for years and continues to be a significant enemy to GIRoA, conditions have arguably changed for both the Taliban and the government, possibly creating an opportunity for the initial steps of conflict resolution.

From the perspective of GIRoA and the United States, the end of hostilities will not be the result of a decisive military victory, but rather a political settlement. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's establishment of the Kabul Process for Peace and Security Cooperation in June 2017 signals a shift in approach, as the initiative aims to leverage regional partnerships to facilitate an Afghan-led and inclusive peace process.⁷⁹ Likely the most significant indication of progress towards a settlement is President Ghani's public offer to initiate peace negotiations with the Taliban without preconditions. This is a dramatic change from previous attempts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table. Such an offer may include the possibility of amending the Afghan constitution, currently rejected by the Taliban, and even incorporate Taliban leadership into the legitimate Afghan political process.⁸⁰ Though the Taliban did reject this offer, it recently published an open letter to the American people urging the U.S. government to participate in peace talks and withdraw its forces, further indicating a situational change in favor of conflict resolution.⁸¹

⁷⁶ Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Ready for Peace? The Afghan Taliban after a Decade of War," *Royal United Services Institute*, January 2017, p. 5, https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201701_bp_ready_for_peace.pdf.

⁷⁷ Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Ready for Peace?" p. 8.

⁷⁸ Ben Brimelow, "ISIS Wants to Be as Dangerous as the Taliban - but It's Not Even Close," *Business Insider*, February 11, 2018, accessed April 19, 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/isis-taliban-afghanistan-terrorism-2018-2>.

⁷⁹ U.S. Embassy in Kabul, "The Kabul Process for Peace & Security Cooperation in Afghanistan Declaration," *U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan*, March 1, 2018, accessed April 20, 2018, <https://af.usembassy.gov/kabul-process-peace-security-cooperation-afghanistan-declaration/>.

⁸⁰ Hekmat Khalil Karzai, "An Unprecedented Peace Offer to the Taliban," *New York Times*, March 11, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/11/opinion/peace-taliban.html>.

⁸¹ Pamela Constable, "Taliban appeals to American people to 'rationally' rethink war effort," *Washington Post*, February 14, 2018, accessed April 27, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/taliban-appeals-to-american-people-torationally-rethink-war-effort/2018/02/14/eaf881fe-1187-11e8-9065-e55346f6de81_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.31dbe0a3253b.

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The change in American policy and strategy for Afghanistan under President Trump also contributed to a shift in dynamics. The current National Security Strategy (NSS) places added pressure on Pakistan to cease support to the Taliban and better facilitate targeting VEOs using Pakistan as a safe haven.⁸² America's shift from a defined timeline to a conditions-based approach to the war in Afghanistan also sent a strong signal to both the Taliban and GIRoA that the United States remains committed to resolving the conflict.⁸³ This commitment has translated to broadened rules of engagement, deployment of additional military advisors, and increased support for the Afghan military's offensive operations in the form of aerial assets.⁸⁴

In terms of evaluating GIRoA versus Taliban-controlled territory, it is useful to note that control is generally divided between urban and rural areas. To date, the Taliban have yet to take control of a provincial capital. Generally, GIRoA maintains influence within the major population centers, while the Taliban battle for control throughout Afghanistan's remote rural landscape. The Taliban's removal of GIRoA or expansion into large urban centers is not probable, especially given renewed U.S. support. Afghanistan's changing political and operational environment may present opportunities and points of leverage for GIRoA and the US to exploit.

Maintaining the Pressure

To create circumstances most conducive for negotiations, GIRoA must maintain pressure on the Taliban while simultaneously providing attractive and feasible alternatives as "off-ramps" for those choosing to abandon the fight. Such pressure should simultaneously follow multiple lines of effort with complementary effects. The first element entails continued kinetic targeting in support of a more methodical approach to fracturing the Taliban. Rather than committing resources to targets of opportunity, targeting should support reconciliation efforts beginning in favorable or lightly contested areas to ensure early successes. This involves the Afghan National Army (ANA), with the support of U.S. military advisors, holding strategic locations, namely provincial and district centers. Regardless of the actual tactical value of these locations, the loss of a government center offers a strategic messaging victory for the Taliban. After securing those key locations, GIRoA should utilize the Afghan Special Security Forces (ASSF), partnered with US Special Operations Forces (USSOF), to isolate and destroy critical Taliban personnel and capabilities as well as the more radical elements of the movement not yet ready to negotiate.

⁸² "National Security Strategy of the United States of America," *The White House*, December 2017, p. 50.

⁸³ "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan," Report to Congress in Accordance with Section 1225 of the Carl Levin and Howard P. "Buck" McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 (P.L. 113-291), as amended, December 2017, p. 3, <https://media.defense.gov/2017/Dec/15/2001856979/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DEC-2017-FINAL-UNCLASS-BASE.PDF>.

⁸⁴ "Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, January 30, 2018, p. 79, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-01-30qr.pdf>.

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The United States should parallel the application of kinetic pressure with other non-lethal efforts to further fracture the Taliban. One method would be to expand the “Renouncers” program run by the National Directorate of Security (NDS), which focuses on co-opting individuals and small groups of Taliban to break rank and turn on their former movement.⁸⁵ Renouncers brought to GIRoA’s side would encourage others to follow suit, promote infighting, and provide valuable intelligence for further systematic lethal and non-lethal targeting. Complimenting these actions would be psychological operations (PSYOPs) to exploit any resulting or newly identified organizational dysfunction.

Constraining the Taliban’s resources is another critical component of applying pressure. The Taliban have a relatively diverse revenue stream to support their operations, which includes drug trafficking, taxation, extortion, illicit mining/agriculture, and foreign financial support.⁸⁶ Though opium does significantly contribute to sustaining the Taliban, committing more resources to counternarcotic operations is not proving effective. According to a United Nations Office on Drug and Crime (UNODC) report from November 2017, opium cultivation increased by 63% from the previous year to 328,000 hectares with production increasing 87% to 9,000 tons.⁸⁷ This occurred despite eradication efforts increasing by 111% while only destroying 750 hectares during that timeframe.⁸⁸ The opium industry is too expansive to adequately degrade and will likely divert resources away from more effective means of impacting the Taliban.

In line with constraining resources is the need to limit the use of safe havens. Pakistan continues to be a significant hindrance to stability in Afghanistan. GIRoA and the United States must continue to limit Pakistan’s role as a safe haven, which the Taliban leadership has long exploited to direct operations in Afghanistan from Pakistan’s frontier territories. Pakistan’s security apparatus also likely continue to provide the Afghan Taliban with support and sanctuary in its “western tribal areas in an effort to counter India’s influence in Afghanistan.”⁸⁹ Persistent political and economic pressure on Pakistan may force the Taliban to primarily operate within the borders of Afghanistan, exposing them to GIRoA and coalition targeting.

Critical to all aspects of applying pressure is the incorporation of influence operations. The unrelenting communication of GIRoA’s endeavors within the context of a consistent narrative is

⁸⁵ Taimoor Shah, Rod Nordland, and Jawad Sukhanyar, “As Taliban Splinters, Afghan Government Quietly Aids a Breakaway Faction,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2017, accessed April 18, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/19/world/asia/afghanistan-taliban-faction-renouncers.html>

⁸⁶ “Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan,” Report to Congress in Accordance with Section 1225 of the Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015 (P.L. 113-291), as amended, December 2017, p. 18, <https://media.defense.gov/2017/Dec/15/2001856979/-1/-1/1/1225-REPORT-DEC-2017-FINAL-UNCLASS-BASE.PDF>. .

⁸⁷ “Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,” *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, January 30, 2018, p. 193, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-01-30qr.pdf>.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Zachary Laub, “The Taliban in Afghanistan,” *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated July 4, 2011, accessed April 19, 2018, p. 6, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/taliban-afghanistan>.

essential to setting conditions for negotiations and dismantling the Taliban's narrative. GIRoA must aggressively publicize each successful negotiation or reconciliation of fragmented Taliban members. Doing so should seek to create a perception of a "domino effect" and the inevitability that the end of the conflict is near, encouraging other factions to open communication with the government.

Incremental Settlement

GIRoA should apply a methodical and targeted approach to pressuring the Taliban while pursuing simultaneous "bottom up and top down" reconciliation efforts. Because the Taliban is not a unified organization, a sole national-level settlement may not be sufficient to significantly impact the security situation throughout Afghanistan. Incremental and local reconciliation negotiations will likely be necessary to achieve a greater effect. However, GIRoA must still pursue national-level negotiations to achieve a symbolic victory, promote fracturing, and diminish the legitimacy of Taliban factions that do not accept the negotiations.

The proposed bottom-up approach requires the identification of areas and Taliban leaders most susceptible to reconciliation or settlement. To initiate this process, GIRoA should first identify the most favorable areas to shape for negotiations rather than attempt initial settlements in highly contested or Taliban-held territory. Doing so will increase the odds of a successful deal, allowing for multiple publicized agreements that will support GIRoA and coalition influence operations promoting the perception of rapid movement towards the end of the conflict. After selecting a promising geographic area, preferably at the provincial level, GIRoA, in conjunction with local power-brokers, can establish communication with mid-level Taliban commanders through existing networks. Critical to this process is determining the local grievances and objectives that drove individuals into the Taliban movement, which may differ from those at the higher national-level leadership. GIRoA's (and the coalition's) willingness to address the local grievances and objectives will dramatically increase the likelihood of achieving an acceptable settlement with the various Taliban groups motivated by local interests.

Acknowledging the range of potential goals and motivations throughout the Taliban, GIRoA should approach each potential settlement or reconciliation effort independently and adapt to the audience and circumstances. Differences in deals may even exist based upon the hierarchical level of Taliban involved. At the strategic level, Taliban leaders are likely motivated by ideology and the pursuit of national-level political goals. At the mid-level (provincial), there is likely going to be a mix of sub-national political objectives and decisions motivated by increasing personal power. Moving further down the organization to the lower-level leaders, goals likely become less political and more focused on individual desires, such as power, money, and ideology.⁹⁰ Finally, the individual fighters are less likely to achieve political position and may have joined the Taliban for money, ideology, status, or even the promise of adventure.

⁹⁰ Farrell and Semple, mple, and Semple, SL_CITATION {"citationID": "QJiOzH5c", "property

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Regardless of motivation and objectives, agreements must be local and tailored while meeting GIRoA's minimum non-negotiable conditions.

To ensure legitimacy and protect GIRoA's interests, the High Peace Council should include representatives for talks. A potential point of negotiation is the offer of local elections at the provincial and district levels in which the Taliban may participate. If a former Taliban leader wins an election, then GIRoA must respect the will of the people. In doing so, GIRoA legitimizes the local leader's influence while maintaining the ability to exert lawful control over that leader. Such political settlements are likely to satisfy mid to higher-level commanders, though do little for the "rank and file." To prevent former low-level insurgents from merely shifting allegiance to other VEOs, the offer of opportunity via reintegration programs may be a viable option. Additionally, negotiations may address amnesty and prisoner release for selected Taliban personnel. The offer of a cease-fire while negotiating, however, is not advisable. Until a settlement is reached, a cease-fire may create breathing room for insincere Taliban elements or provide an excuse to abandon negotiations should there be an incident violating the pause.

Finally, exploiting successful negotiations is paramount. Media should not only make settlements highly public, but also frame them as agreements or arrangements rather than a Taliban surrender. The Taliban are more likely to enter talks if they can maintain their honor and not be perceived as surrendering or accepting defeat. It will also be important for influence operations to mitigate the effects of spoilers, false starts, and delays. Negotiations will be challenging and rife with setbacks. Emphasizing successes and GIRoA's commitment to ending the war will be a continuous effort.

USSOF's Role in Shaping the Environment

Though conflict resolution will primarily be the result of political efforts, the military plays a critical role in shaping the environment to make a settlement possible. Beyond its obvious responsibility to apply pressure to the Taliban, the U.S. military's access to less secure areas, its established relationships with GIRoA officials, and its intelligence apparatus make it a valuable component in facilitating negotiations. USSOF will be essential in assisting Afghan forces in targeting Taliban elements to best set conditions for negotiations, as well as providing the resources necessary to maintain and advance territorial gains.

Conflict Prevention in Afghanistan

Assuming the current Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan succeeds and the Taliban reconcile, the U.S.-led coalition and GIRoA will face the herculean task of reintegrating the Taliban into Afghan society, specifically, the short-term problem of reintegrating the Taliban appropriately coupled with the long-term challenge of preventing future insurgency by accounting for the youth bulge. Furthermore, GIRoA and the United States must accept that former-Taliban will be afforded political and societal inclusion if reintegration and prevention are to succeed. Each is rife with complex challenges ranging from how to implement fairly to

how to sustain programs. However, building a framework loosely derived from similar successful models that address both challenges (short-term and long-term) with sustainable Afghan solutions will support a successful reintegration and stymie future insurgency.

Keys to success are a number of important considerations. First and foremost, reintegration and prevention must be locally focused with a bottom-up approach, a decentralized Afghan method. Next, any reintegration solutions or models must be sustainable in terms of both funding and logistics. These cannot be costly ideas ripe with expensive and technologically advanced equipment that Afghanistan cannot sustain absent massive support from foreign donors. The solutions must also be Afghan-led. They cannot be U.S.-led with an Afghan face; they must be Afghan implemented, with minimal U.S. assistance. Additionally, these reintegration options must be Afghan solutions for Afghan problems. The ideas herein are thus meant to help generate Afghan options by providing creative ideas. It is also worth noting that some Taliban will simply return to their homes and families, choosing to opt out of formal reintegration programs. Lastly, there are obviously other creative options to support reintegrating the Taliban back into Afghan society; these specific creative options focus on building national identity, job opportunity, life skills, and hope through economic opportunity and societal inclusion.

Short-Term Opportunity for Taliban Reintegration

In the short-term, GIRoA must find a way to successfully reintegrate reconciled Taliban into society, which requires a delicate balance between countering extremism and providing an opportunity to those who reconcile. Key to this success is providing work opportunities for such individuals, but not to the extent that it seems former Taliban are receiving preferential treatment by GIRoA.⁹¹ Thus, a regionally based program—loosely based on a national model—that simultaneously supports local infrastructure development, provides immediate work opportunity to former-Taliban, and teaches basic skills to foster future employment could achieve such goals.

There are multiple options for ensuring these goals are achieved. At the local level, reconciled Taliban could join regional infrastructure development projects. By identifying potential infrastructure development projects requiring low skilled laborers (irrigation, basic construction, etc.), Taliban in need of work opportunities from areas requiring such projects would be afforded paying jobs while simultaneously supporting their home region. Projects would require a local cadre of semi-skilled laborers to oversee the project, but recruiting support, funding, and material from local villagers standing to benefit from the project would aid in this effort. Participants would be given opportunities to off-ramp upon completion of the local project or opt to join a similar national-level effort: The Afghan Conservation Corps (ACC). The ACC would support similar projects, but branch out beyond local development, refining

⁹¹ Barnett Rubin, “Theses on Peacemaking in Afghanistan: A Manifesto,” *War on the Rocks*, February 23, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/02/theses-peacemaking-afghanistan-manifesto/>.

individuals' skills and supporting provincial or national level development. The idea behind both the local infrastructure development project and the ACC is not to force former Taliban to pay their debt to society, but rather provide them with an immediate opportunity to prevent a return to extremism via simple infrastructure development projects. While the focus of the program would be infrastructure development, the workers would receive a small salary, food, and shelter—enough to provide hope for the future and allow them to reintegrate into Afghan society. Furthermore, members of this program would learn basic skills to be leveraged later life, preventing a return to extremism.

The program would also focus on countering violent extremism through a carefully crafted narrative that emphasizes the importance of returning to stability. Upon completion of their service, at both the regional or national level, participants would have the choice to either exit the program or continue onto trade school or the Afghan Corps of Engineers, a cadre of skilled laborers loosely managed by the ANDSF, supporting infrastructure development. The Corps of Engineers would be similar to the ACC, but with a focus on more advanced skills such as bridge and road construction or expanding the national electrical grid. Members of the Corps of Engineers would graduate beyond shovels and onto more complex infrastructure development. Similarly, successful ACC members could also opt to attend trade school instead, learning important skills for future careers to support themselves, their families, and the future of Afghanistan. With a program of this sort, former Taliban fighters would receive skills, training, and hope for the future.

Long-Term Prevention of Extremism in Afghan Youth

Beyond short-term requirements, a worthwhile reintegration effort must also account for preventing extremism in the long-term. While preventing extremism is a complex and often debated topic subject to numerous variables, research indicates that it often stems from a lack of opportunity. Specifically, a lack of work opportunity and purpose for those vulnerable to manipulation is key.⁹² Therefore, a years-long pipeline that starts at youth and leads to early adulthood while countering extremism and simultaneously fostering national identity, job opportunities, life skills, and hope for the future would be a valuable tool.

Akin to reintegration, prevention is a multistep process, necessitating a localized bottom-up approach, that is a loosely based on a national framework. Using the current Afghan Scouts program as a prototype, but with a regional focus, Afghan youth would be encouraged to join a community-based organization that fosters national identity, civic involvement and responsibility, and teaches basic skills ranging from computer skills to basic farming techniques.⁹³ Similarly, Junior Commando organizations (similar to Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC)) would be offered where appropriate. At a certain age, participants

⁹² Barnett Rubin, "Theses on Peacemaking in Afghanistan: A Manifesto."

⁹³ "Our History," *Afghan Scouts*, accessed March 11, 2018, <http://www.afghan-scouts.org/our-history/>.

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would be given the option to leave the program or continue to the next level, consisting of local infrastructure development projects or the ACC, as described above. While different, each of the organizations would continue to foster a national identity, but with a regional focus that encourages responsibility and builds basic life skills. After a few more years of service, participants would be given another chance to either leave the organization or continue onto a new track of service, joining the ANDSF, ANA, Afghan Corps of Engineers, or attend trade school. Each of these paths would provide job opportunity and skills while instilling hope for personal future and national success.

Political and Societal Inclusion

While the above solutions address economic inclusion for reconciled Taliban and the growing youth population, political and societal inclusion are also important. GIRoA must accept that a future in which the Taliban reconcile may also contain former Taliban filling local leadership positions at the district and potentially provincial levels. Providing economic opportunity through jobs programs, allowing former Taliban to return to their normal lives, and accepting that some former Taliban will serve in leadership roles, will assist in providing greater inclusion. Political and societal inclusion will help support a renewed identity that is no longer GIRoA versus Taliban, but GIRoA and former Taliban working for a better Afghanistan at the local, regional, and national levels. This will not be the case for all Taliban, but it is not unreasonable for those who hope to reconcile.

How to Implement These Solutions

The intent with any of these suggested solutions is not to create more costly programs that simply use U.S. solutions to solve Afghan problems. Rather, the notion is to use simple and relatively cheap ideas to build both short-term methods for dealing with reintegration and long-term plans for preventing future radicalization across Afghanistan. While arguing that economic opportunity and purpose are key to this process is straightforward, justifying how to implement and pay for such programs is seemingly more difficult.

In terms of U.S. and coalition implementation, the initial management of these ideas would be split between the Department of State (DoS) and Department of Defense (DoD). Given the DoD's larger budget and presence in the country, they would need to take the reins in the short-term to ensure initial success and foster reintegration. However, their role must be minimized. In the long-term, DoD is not the appropriate U.S. agency for preventing radicalization by providing opportunity. The DoS, and specifically the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), should take the lead. However, it cannot be a U.S.-led effort if reintegration is to succeed; it must be an Afghan project with U.S. support. Internal to Afghanistan, a similar bifurcation of effort between agencies and ministries should occur. The Ministry of Defense (MoD) can very loosely support the initial effort in terms of providing security and structure to ensure success in reintegration, yet its involvement must be extremely

limited if former Taliban are expected to accept such a program. Certain elements of the MoD can support specific aspects of the program, such as the Junior Commandos, but for long-term sustainment and infrastructure development, multiple ministries will need to share the burden, ranging from Interior Affairs to Rural Rehabilitation. This is not a military program, but rather an initiative to support long-term stability and prevent radicalization.

Similarly, initial success for reintegration will require foreign donor support; however, this program is intended to be cheap and self-sustaining. None of the aforementioned ideas require massive investments of money or supplies. Costs will be kept relatively low with little overhead due to small salaries, low-cost hardware, and local support. For example, rather than high-tech and expensive excavation equipment to which the modern world is accustomed, the ACC and Afghan Corps of Engineers will leverage a mix of rudimentary and regionally-sourced equipment that Afghanistan can sustain and maintain on its own, absent U.S. support, i.e., shovels not excavators.

Furthermore, organizations such as the ACC or Corps of Engineers could be exported to regional neighbors who pay for the services provided, as an Afghan regional infrastructure development team. Internal to Afghanistan, certain projects could be funded locally to support community requirements and infrastructure development. Development and infrastructure projects could also fund themselves, drawing on revenue from existing micro-economies each project supports: timber, mining, agriculture, etc. There are also opportunities for support from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in terms of both funding, management, and expertise. A multifaceted Afghan-led approach, with support from the U.S., coalition, and NGOs will help ensure successful short-term and long-term success for reintegration efforts. The intent is not another expensive program to fix Afghan problems with U.S. dollars and solutions, but rather assistance in developing and sustaining Afghan solutions.

Current Examples

Local, regional, and international models with similar frameworks provides real-world examples that give evidence of the value of these ideas. In fact, some of these organizations already provide the services described herein, but they must be linked to ensure long-term success. Internal to Afghanistan, for example, the Afghan Scouts have been widely successful in building a youth organization that fosters civic action and national identity.⁹⁴ The USAID Afghanistan Workforce Development Program has been successful in fostering work opportunity for Afghans.⁹⁵ Similarly, USAID's Stability in Key Areas program focuses on using locals to support community development—akin to what the focus of the ACC would be.⁹⁶ These simple

⁹⁴ "Our History," *Afghan Scouts*.

⁹⁵ "Afghanistan Workforce Development Program," *USAID: From the American People*, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/fact-sheets/afghanistan-workforce-development-program>.

⁹⁶ "Stability in Key Areas," *USAID: From the American People*, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/fact-sheets/stability-key-areas-sika>.

examples only scratch the surface of the myriad of successful, and unsuccessful, programs designed to build opportunity and promote development across Afghanistan. This effort, however, would aim to learn from past success and failures, while also bridging various programs into a cohesive effort: reintegration.

Numerous models external to Afghanistan also demonstrate the value of these types of programs. In Iran, the Basij Resistance Force is an example of using a voluntary organization to foster national identity. While the Basij are shrouded in controversy for a number of reasons, they still provide an example for fostering civil service through incentives and rewards.⁹⁷ The Cubs of the Caliphate, the Islamic State's youth organization, also provides an example of fostering identity through youth education. Like the Basij however, it has produced pernicious results, but it provides a framework nonetheless. Fortunately, India also provides other examples much less controversial than the Iranian Basij or the Islamic State. For its youth, India has a mix of national and regional organizations that foster civic involvement. In Delhi, for example, an organization called Pravah focuses on building leadership for social change while fostering self-awareness and critical thinking.⁹⁸ Similarly, in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, there are organizations focused on involving youth in community development.⁹⁹ Aimed at young adults, India also offers vocational training opportunities, trade schools, and partnerships with business that focus on skills specific to urban and rural areas.¹⁰⁰ The advantage of the Indian structure is that such organizations seem to be locally focused and executed. The disadvantage is a lack of a national strategy to focus the youth at the national level. These regional examples provide sound models for forming similar, yet more comprehensive efforts in Afghanistan.

Where to Implement

The keys to successfully building programs of this sort will be to implement them correctly and in the appropriate regions of the country. A solution that works in Kabul will not necessarily work in Kandahar, and an urban model may not take in a rural district. Thus, the models outlined above are just that, models. They will need to be tailored appropriately to succeed for the long-term. Fortunately, several unique and regionally specific ideas already exist.

One such example stems from the Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, India (TAPI) Pipeline project. Recently in Herat, a group of Taliban claimed they were open to the idea of reconciliation if they were paid to provide security for TAPI.¹⁰¹ While the idea of GIROA

⁹⁷ Ali Alfoneh, "The Basij Resistance Force," *The Iran Primer*, accessed March 11, 2018, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/basij-resistance-force>.

⁹⁸ "India," *Innovations in Civic Participation*, accessed March 11, 2018, <http://www.icicp.org/resource-library/icp-publications/global-youth-service-database/asia-and-the-pacific/south-asia-2/india/>.

⁹⁹ "India," *Innovations in Civic Participation*.

¹⁰⁰ Roy Savion, "Vocational Training in India," *Vocational Training HQ*, February 10, 2018, <https://www.vocationaltraininghq.com/vocational-training-in-india/>.

¹⁰¹ Catherine Putz, "TAPI Moves into Afghanistan, Taliban Promise to Protect the Project," *The Diplomat*, February 27, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/02/tapi-moves-into-afghanistan-taliban-promise-to-protect-the-project/>.

supporting armed Taliban security guards seems farfetched, the same Taliban could be offered work opportunities directly building the pipeline. At first, the work would be basic construction not requiring advanced skills. In time, however, workers with the appropriate aptitude could join the Corps of Engineers or attend trade school for advanced training and skills, further supporting TAPI or other infrastructure development projects. Funding for a project of this sort would be low, as TAPI already has international funding and support. Skeptics will likely point to disparate reports regarding the lack of project's progress in Turkmenistan. Regardless of TAPI-internal constraints, the example still supports the idea: former Taliban fighters provided opportunity via infrastructure development projects.

Another example stems from Dand District in Kandahar Province. Each year, the villagers of the district work together to ensure their irrigation canal will effectively nourish the fields and orchards of the surrounding villages; it is the lifeblood of the area's economic prosperity.¹⁰² The local elders organize the annual effort to ensure all that aim to benefit either contribute monetarily or in the form of labor. In 2014, the Afghan Irrigation and Restoration Project became involved with the annual effort, fortifying the canals and greatly improving their efficiency and survivability. Furthermore, the villagers helped fund the year-long effort as they knew it would support their future livelihood. The ACC or a similar regional program could use this example as a model. Reconciled Taliban could participate in improving a district-wide irrigation system. With support and funding from the local population, coupled with expertise from trained engineers, a similar hardened irrigation canal could be built in an area needing such infrastructure. Further, those with the appropriate aptitude could receive additional training (Corps of Engineers or trade school) for future employment and infrastructure development, stymieing the cycle of extremism. These two simple yet realistic examples provide models for building creative Afghan options for conflict prevention.

Conclusion

Reintegrating the Taliban into Afghan society and preventing future insurgency will be incredibly difficult, yet it is not an unreasonable goal for GIRoA. In fact, it is a necessary point of focus if Taliban reconciliation and reintegration are to succeed in the future. By focusing short-term efforts on opportunities for reconciled Taliban, long-term efforts on prevention to address the youth-bulge, and fostering political and societal inclusion of former Taliban, the potential for successful reintegration exists. Furthermore, a focus on national identity, job opportunity, and life skills, through what is essentially an Afghan jobs program, provides hope

¹⁰² "Afghan Villagers Unite to Preserve Access to Water," *The World Bank*, October 11, 2017, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/10/11/development-projects-lead-to-community-investment-in-kandahar-region>.

for the future and stymies radicalization. This effort must be regionally focused, Afghan-led, and sustainable. If not, it will simply be another costly U.S. failure in Afghanistan.

Transition of Roles in Afghanistan

In just over two and a half years, at the end of 2020, the current RSM will transition to another phase of the campaign. The United States' goal is to ensure South Asia is not a safe haven where terrorist groups can plot transnational attacks against the United States or U.S. allies and partners by maintaining a stable regional counterterrorism (CT) platform. Successful transition from a focus on military operations to achieve conflict termination to post-conflict resolution activities depends on U.S. civilian and military leadership recognizing that the end of the conflict is as critical as the conduct of war.¹⁰³ As the coalition moves closer to achieving the conditions established by GEN John Nicholson's "What Winning Looks Like in Afghanistan," the coalition must communicate a plan to transition clear objectives moving forward. According to this strategy, these winning scenarios include, but are not limited to: a successful reconciliation between GIRoA and the Taliban, a professionalized ANDSF capable of reducing violence in the nation to an acceptable level, a confirmation that 80 percent of the population favors the existing national government of Afghanistan, or degradation of Al Qaeda and the Islamic State capabilities to the point at which they no longer represent a significant threat to the stability of the country. Now is the time for the United States to develop the conditions necessary to achieve these possible outcomes and properly transition the coalition's efforts. Delaying establishment of these conditions will otherwise find the coalition ill-prepared to take advantage of the changing dynamics of the conflict.

Afghan Government Transition

GIRoA lacks a communicated strategy for its interactions with the international community, namely the coalition. U.S. interests and expectations profoundly influence GIRoA's decision making due to foreign aid and military capabilities. The current sponsor-client relationship is not sustainable and encourages an ineffective status-quo that will not promote Afghanistan's sovereignty in the future. The coalition needs to continue shifting ownership of the mission to its Afghan partners. Empowering Afghan partners begins at the top. GIRoA needs to establish a strategy within which the United States and the coalition can operate. In order to promote Afghan independence, the United States should encourage and facilitate Afghan interaction with its regional partners. Though the United States must continue to exert influence to serve U.S. national interests, failing to encourage Afghan independence will result in Afghanistan remaining a donor state reliant upon foreign presence and support to function beyond RSM. Implementation of an Internal Defense and Development (IDAD) program will promote

¹⁰³ William Flavin, "Planning for Conflict Termination and Post-Conflict Success," *Parameters*, vol. 33, no. 3, Autumn 2003.

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balanced growth and build viable institutions in social, political, and economic sectors.¹⁰⁴ Adequately publicizing the IDAD program will serve to link the government with the interests of the population. IDAD initiatives should include the following elements: security, social development, economic development, and political development.

Regional Transition

Afghanistan's neighbors, with the exception of Pakistan, have a vested interest in maintaining relative stability in Afghanistan for their national interests. Regional actors share interests in protecting their homeland from transnational criminals, minimizing refugee immigration from Afghanistan, and developing mutually beneficial economic infrastructures. As the timeline moves toward 2020 and beyond, the Afghan government needs to set the conditions for greater regional cooperation. For example, the Afghan government can leverage the ASSF's renowned CT expertise to build regional security partnerships through the implementation of a functionally-based Interstate Targeting Forces, execution of regional CT and counter-narcotics exercises, and promotion of Professional Military Education exchanges. All of these initiatives encourage partnerships and increase interoperability with partners to promote regional security and cooperation on other issues.

The proposed Interstate Targeting Forces could stem from bilateral agreements between regional partners.¹⁰⁵ In this model, states work together to counter shared threats. For example, an Afghan-Pakistani (AFPAK) Interstate Targeting Force would promote intelligence sharing to target and eliminate national threats that reside along the two neighbors' border. This solution does not advocate for ASSF to conduct missions in Pakistan, but instead to foster a relationship where the Pakistani military will target and eliminate threats to Afghanistan that reside in Pakistan, such as the Taliban. In return, the ASSF could target and eliminate threats to Pakistan that reside in Afghanistan, such as the Terik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP). The Interstate Targeting Force will require consistent engagements to build trust and foster an environment of intelligence sharing. Similar bilateral cooperation could be established with Iran and China.

U.S. Transition

Currently, the United States employs a DoD heavy solution in Afghanistan. The DoD does not have all the appropriate institutional expertise or the capacity to execute the variety of tasks needed for the post-RSM transition period which must emphasize post-conflict resolution operations. As the coalition moves toward 2020 and beyond, the United States will need to shift the main effort to a DoS solution with the military in a supporting role. Some factors to consider include the need to redesign the organizational structure based off required expertise resident in the DoS and not merely the greater availability of DoD personnel. Although a Special Forces

¹⁰⁴ "Field Manual 100-20: Internal Defense and Development," Department of the Army, November 1974.

¹⁰⁵ Terry Gill and Dieter Fleck, *Handbook of International Law of Military Operations*, Oxford University Press, 2010, p. 308.

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Operational Detachment Alpha (SFOD-A) detachment commander or SEAL platoon commander is capable of accomplishing military objectives, advising provincial governors on post-conflict reconstruction or election reforms are not within their professional expertise. A further complication arises from the unique qualities of Afghanistan's diverse regions, posing additional complexities and challenges. The most effective method to address these socio-cultural and geo-physical challenges is by building and employing sub-nationally aligned organizations that leverage U.S., coalition, and indigenous expertise.

Analysis indicates that some form of Sub-National Interagency Platforms (SNIPs) are required to support civil-military coordination and deconfliction of efforts. The team recommends designing and employing four regionally-focused SNIPs in Jalalabad, Kandahar, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif respectively in order to support the U.S. Embassy's mission in Afghanistan. Each SNIP would have a single director, a specifically-designated mission and purpose, along with adequate resources and authorities commensurate with their assigned responsibilities.¹⁰⁶ The SNIP's director will come from the agency most appropriate for the region's challenges. To ensure unity of effort and command, each SNIP Director must report directly to the U.S. Ambassador in Kabul, who serves as the ultimate decision maker on foreign policy and national security issues. Every SNIP will consist of civilian and military representatives from the national intelligence community, federal law enforcement agencies, agricultural experts, economic advisors, governance professionals, and other government agencies that are required to support the local government's IDAD program. For example, Helmand would likely require the Drug Enforcement Agency expertise, while Jalalabad/Herat would require more expertise resident in intelligence agencies, and U.S. Embassy in Kabul would require a strong contingent of Conflict and Stabilization Operations (CSO) personnel from DoS.

The DoD will clearly augment the SNIPs with continuous rotations of regional experts likely to include an SFOD-A and a company (or battalion) of advisors from the Security Force Assistance Brigades (SFAB). Combining ARSOF 2035's idea of investing in human capital to develop regional experts and recognize that every SOF operator has his or her strengths and weaknesses, the team recommends deliberately aligning a USSF battalion to the Afghanistan mission.¹⁰⁷ At the tactical level, unit rotations and competing priorities around the world cause the U.S. SOF enterprise to experience a lack of continuity in the current mission and the effectiveness of advisors vary across the formation. To address these challenges, U.S. SOF must adopt a deliberate, persistent and long-term approach to partnering.

Operating in conjunction with the Military Group (MILGROUP) assigned to U.S. Embassy Kabul, a USSF Battalion (-) headquarters could man a Special Operations Command Forward

¹⁰⁶ Robert Pope, "Interagency Task Forces: The Right Tools for the Job," *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, Summer 2011.

¹⁰⁷ Kenneth Tovo, "USASOC Strategy 2035," accessed on 16 March 2018.
www.soc.mil/Assorted%20Pages/USASOC%20Strategy-2035.pdf.

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(SOCFWD-Afghanistan). A company headquarters (AOB) could be collocated with the SOCFWD to support the command and control of four SFOD-As, each assigned to one of the four SNIPs. The Battalion headquarters (HQ) would maintain a continuous presence in the country, with the subordinate Operational Detachment Alpha (ODAs) and AOBs rotating in and out of the country on a sustainable timeline that facilitates optimal operational effectiveness. ODAs would continue advising their Afghan SOF counterparts at the operational level, supervising the Interstate Targeting Teams, and building partner forces' capacities through continuous engagements. Additionally, detachments would focus on the execution of Phase 0 tasks in support of the United States' overarching goal of maintaining a CT platform in the region. Repeated rotations by the same elements would increase continuity across time to build regional expertise within USSOF formations. At the operational level, continuity would increase organizational knowledge and decrease operational risk due to the formation's cultural and regional appreciation for the mission. Employment of regional experts would allow further delegation of authorities that are commensurate with the assigned responsibilities. Ultimately, these initiatives will improve continuity for advisors and trainers to promote trust, rapport, and mission success. The SFAB's role would be to conduct security cooperation activities to include train, advise, assist, enable, and accompany foreign and indigenous security forces.¹⁰⁸ The SFAB company (or battalion) at each SNIP would be responsible for combat advising the conventional Afghan security forces, ANA, and Afghan National Police focused on maintaining day-to-day local security.

Similar to how the current core Special Operations Joint Task Force-Afghanistan (SOJTF-A) staff assembles for the Strategic Appreciation Seminar and Senior Leaders Seminar or how a military formation validating its core tasks at a Combat Training Center before a deployment, personnel assigned to a SNIP should also validate their tasks with similar events. Beyond building unit cohesion, the SNIPs could define the organization's terms of reference, establish a common understanding of the mission, and determine critical gaps prior to a deployment.

By organizing U.S. involvement in Afghanistan in this way, the United States can customize its efforts to achieve the best fit for the emerging post-conflict environment. This creative solution would increase interagency cooperation, shared understanding, and unity of effort across the interagency enterprise. At the operational level, these SNIPs may prove the solution for the emerging Afghan environment, but the relationships and processes built will also prepare the U.S. interagency enterprise for future engagements on other battlefields as it did in the past. Successful implementation of just such a program occurred during the Korean War when the UN

¹⁰⁸ C. Todd Lopez, "Security force assistance brigades to free brigade combat teams from advise, assist mission," U.S. Army, accessed March 16, 2018, https://www.army.mil/article/188004/security_force_assistance_brigades_to_free_brigade_combat_teams_from_advise_assist_mission.

Civil Assistance Command Korea (UNCACK) took over many responsibilities for advising and assisting government at national and local levels.¹⁰⁹

Conclusion

Expertise required for the post-RSM mission is spread across the interagency enterprise, where no single agency can accomplish the task alone. DoS and DoD should collaborate, develop, and enable SNIPs to prioritize and supervise the military, political, economic, and informational aspects of future operations in Afghanistan. Assuming GIRoA develops a strategy under which the coalition can operate, a civil-military plan must be developed that describes the desired end state in sufficient enough detail so that each of the agencies can build its supporting strategies. Above all, everyone involved must realize the need for flexibility as the end state can shift and the enemy will always get a say. Conflict termination marks the end of fighting, not the end of the conflict. The military has a significant role in setting the conditions for conflict termination but must operate in a supporting role during the conflict resolution phase as DoS becomes the lead organization.

Afghanistan Narrative and Influence Operations (IO)

A critical aspect of both insurgent and counterinsurgent strategies is the ability to mobilize the population for action (or inaction). Developing an effective narrative is simultaneously the most important and the most difficult task the NPS research team addressed. General Joseph Votel, Commander of U.S. Central Command, stated during the SOJTF-A Senior Leaders Seminar that operations in the information environment are a “national weak point.” The coalition’s efforts in Afghanistan with regards to operations in the information environment is not an exception. Afghanistan’s demographic frictions, geographic austerity, and history of foreign invasion create a multitude of interests and values, making the development of a single narrative extremely difficult if not impossible. These disparities have stymied previous coalition attempts to effectively mobilize the population. Beyond these inherent challenges, the Taliban has an extremely effective narrative, which mobilizes the population and effectively undermines coalition and GIRoA narratives. Coalition forces are also to blame. The coalition failed to prioritize influence operations commensurate with their importance and to plan and execute long-term influence strategies. The coalition has also employed a disjointed narrative that fails to establish credibility, targets logic over emotion, and fails to leverage the power of Afghan culture and Islam. Finally, the coalition has failed to build capacity and synchronize its efforts

¹⁰⁹ Nadia Shadlow, *War in the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success into Political Victory*, (Washington D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2017).

with Afghan messaging organizations to produce culturally appropriate narratives that hold credibility within the population and support mobilization. The following subsections discuss existing challenges, offer principles for planning and executing influence operations, and provide potential ideas for incorporation into existing and future influence operations in Afghanistan.

Why is the Taliban Narrative So Effective?

The Taliban are winning the narrative war because they tell a better story, and they have made influence operations their center of gravity – every action (kinetic and non-kinetic) is an influence operation. Below is a list of Taliban narratives that have endured over the course of the conflict. These specific narratives are drawn from Dr. Tom Johnson’s book *Taliban Narratives*, which takes a holistic look at both coalition and Taliban narratives.¹¹⁰

- Taliban victory in cosmic conflict is inevitable.
- Islam cannot be defeated.
- The Taliban are “national heroes,” willing to sacrifice all for *Allah* and country.
- Afghans have a long and honorable history of defeating invading foreign infidels.
- Foreign invaders, as well as their Afghan puppets, are attempting to destroy Afghan religion and traditions.
- All Afghans have an obligation to join the *jihad* against the foreigners and apostates.

The Taliban narrative is effective for several reasons. First, the organization has used the same general narrative over the course of the war, changing the supporting evidence to meet the changes in circumstance. There is power in repetition. Second, it invokes Islam and *Allah*, drawing upon the religion’s credibility and offering the Taliban’s cause a perceived degree of divine protection. In a country where everything depends on God willing it to happen, this is critical. Next, the narrative presents an existential threat to the target audience’s way of life (religion and traditions), which touches on the audience’s emotions, as opposed to appealing to logic. Simultaneously, the narrative undermines friendly narratives and actions. The argument and the resultant fear are reinforced by GIRoA’s efforts to modernize the country with social reforms, such as women’s rights. The brilliance is that the narrative is crafted in such a way that coalition actions – like enhancing women’s rights – inherently undermine GIRoA and coalition credibility with Taliban audiences and reinforces the Taliban narrative. Military actions are not exempt. Partnered operations portray Afghan forces as puppets. Unilateral operations portray the coalition as foreign invaders. Any situation that involves GIRoA and foreigners, especially those that result in civilian casualties, support the Taliban’s narrative that foreign invaders are destroying the Afghan way of life. The Taliban’s ability to craft such effective narratives and stories is largely because they are operating on their ‘home turf.’¹¹¹ As 16 years of ineffective

¹¹⁰ Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives: The Use and Power of Stories in the Afghan Conflict*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

¹¹¹ Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives*, p. 8.

coalition narratives illustrate, understanding the cultural nuances necessary to craft this type of narrative is something that few, if any, westerners can do.

In terms of tactics, the Taliban employs various mechanisms to effectively communicate their narrative to the population ranging from word of mouth, night letters, and even an official website. Word of mouth is effective because it puts a face to a message and builds trust to further appeal to the population's emotions. The use of night letters evoke emotions that are associated with previous foreign invaders; Afghans used night letters to communicate with the population during the Soviet invasion. Additionally, night letters empower the village mullahs, who are often the only person who can read, to interpret the letter. Due to a largely illiterate rural population, many people cannot challenge what writings of these night letters. Finally, the Taliban utilize their website to update and appeal to supporters abroad. The official Taliban website is available in five languages and provides facts, messages, and updates from Taliban leaders on the situation in Afghanistan. These three delivery mechanisms work together to build trust and transparency within the Taliban organization that GIRoA and the coalition cannot effectively counter because it appeals to the population's emotions.

What Characteristics Make the Coalition/Afghan Narrative Less Effective?

The largest problem with coalition messaging is the perceived – if not *actual* – lack of a unified strategic narrative in Afghanistan. This challenge is exacerbated by a lack of coordination between Afghanistan and the coalition during the development of the narrative and inconsistency in propagating it. The lack of a strong narrative puts the coalition on the defensive. Counter-narratives react, while a narrative must be reacted to. The United States spends more time and resources on counter-messaging, telling the audience what not to do, as opposed to communicating a strong message that provides purpose and direction for the target audience, i.e., taking the offensive.¹¹² Part of taking the offensive and mobilizing the population is employing a narrative that reaches the emotional domain and compels people to action. Currently, coalition arguments are based on logic. Finally, improving the quality of the narrative is not something the United States or coalition can do alone. It requires a collaborative effort with Afghan partners to develop something that resonates culturally and considers the diverse values of the Afghan population's sub-groups.

In terms of executing influence operations, there are two areas for improvement. First, influence operations and its practitioners are not empowered within organizations. Unlike the

¹¹² Scott Ruston and Jeffrey Halverson, "'Counter' or 'Alternative': Contesting Video Narratives of Violent Islamist Extremism," in *Social Media and Visual Propaganda*, ed. Carol Winkler and Cori Dauber. (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 2014). The authors address the idea of alternative narratives, which address the grievances of the population, but provide a different route to get there than the extremist narrative. For example, if the target audience wants governmental change, the extremist narrative would say pick up a gun or IED, while the alternative narrative might suggest peaceful protest as an alternative means to the same end.

Taliban who see influence operations as a main effort, coalition forces often see it playing a supporting role. Kinetic operations can be influence operations, but they cannot speak for themselves. Their effects must be propagated, and the operations must be tied into a larger influence strategy, when applicable. Second, coalition words (narratives and stories) do not always match coalition deeds. Saying the Afghans are in the lead while outnumbering them on patrols creates a deeds-words mismatch. While words may provide time and space for a temporary period, they must eventually be backed by tangible action to shift perceptions. Finally, the narrative must support a long-term strategy and vice versa.

Principles for Narrative and Influence Operations

Applying lesson learned from the previous discussion, this section offers suggestions to improve U.S. narrative and influence operations.

Build a Better Story: The first step is creating a strong narrative. This is critical in a storytelling culture like Afghanistan. All U.S. dissemination efforts are moot if the story is weak. While marketing tricks may increase exposure of a message, a weak message will not cause changes in behavior or perception.¹¹³

Consult the Afghans: While the NPS research team developed several narratives, these narratives require cultural vetting from the Afghan Government before they can be finalized and implemented. The Afghans know the culture and religion far better than any westerner and can incorporate culture, history, heroes and subtle nuances to produce stories that will resonate with the population. The consultation must incorporate a sufficient sampling of Afghan demographics. The United States cannot simply rely on the western-educated Kabulis who been overly influenced by western culture. Finally, the United States is not absolved of responsibility. It must take an active role in advising its counterparts on the principles of narrative development and dissemination to create a hybrid approach to messaging in Afghanistan.

Leverage Islam and Culture: Avoiding or failing to incorporate aspects of culture and religion into the narrative leaves powerful weaponry unused. Coalition elements appear to avoid these critical tools due to a lack of understanding or fear that they will make a cultural faux pas. Consulting Afghans and incorporating them into the narrative development and execution process will assist in bringing these powerful tools to bear.¹¹⁴

Appeal to Emotion: Emotion is a more powerful tool than logic when attempting to compel people to action and should be leveraged more.¹¹⁵ This disconnect is readily visible when the coalition attempts to appeal to Afghan emotions using western logic.

¹¹³ Scott Mann, *Game Changers: Going Local to Defeat Violent Extremists*, (Leesburg, VA: Tribal Analysis Publishing, 2015), p. 191-218.

¹¹⁴ Thomas H. Johnson, *Taliban Narratives*, p. 13.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 7.

Back Words with Deeds: As LTC(R) Scott Mann argues “social proof is critical to advancing a master narrative that promotes relative stability and makes violent extremists irrelevant.” The United States must capitalize and propagate actions that take place organically within Afghanistan, such as locals standing up to the Taliban or Taliban members who decide to reconcile. This also applies to actions that the United States orchestrates as part of a larger strategy.

Assess Messaging Organizations: This research suggests a need to assess the Afghan capacity for messaging and consider how coalition organizations are integrated into Afghan ones. A second point to consider is whether influence professionals are empowered within these organizations. Are they incorporated into planning from the beginning? Alternatively, are they an afterthought?

Consider Dissemination Mechanisms: Are the dissemination mechanisms capable of reaching the intended audience? Overlaying the cell phone coverage map with Taliban contested and controlled areas shows that many of these areas are outside of the coverage area.¹¹⁶ Thus, word of mouth or radio/television transmission will have greater access to these areas, as opposed to social media. Social media is likely a tool better suited to more urban areas. That said, Dr. Camber Warren highlights the fact that social media is a double-edged sword. Unlike mass media (TV, Radio, periodicals) which have a unifying effect, social media has a polarizing effect because it allows individuals to tailor their content and ultimately create echo-chambers of their own making.¹¹⁷ Thus, instead of reaching a broader audience, social media may essentially be preaching to the choir.

Focus on a Small Audience: The smaller the target audience, the greater the effectiveness of the message. Although there is an overarching narrative, messages must be tailored to specific audiences and dialects. Messages sent to supporters, opposition, fence sitters, and regional players should differ. Additionally, there are about 65 different spoken dialects within Afghanistan. GIRoA and the coalition cannot simply rely on the front and back of a leaflet to communicate to the entire population, but rather focus the messages to specific audiences that appeal to their emotions, culture, and religion.

Components of the Solution

The remainder of this section offers initial ideas for improving narrative and influence operations in Afghanistan. The first portion offers thoughts on a potential strategic narrative for

¹¹⁶ “Quarterly Report to the United States Congress,” *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-01-30qr.pdf>, and Afghan Telecom Regulatory Authority, “Coverage Maps,” accessed March 21, 2018, <http://atra.gov.af/en/page/7000/7006>.

¹¹⁷ T. Camber Warren, *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 3, May 1, 2015, p. 2971, 2015Peace Research

Afghanistan, while the latter portion offers specific ideas that could be incorporated into larger influence operations and strategies. Ultimately, the team seeks to provide answers, albeit partial answers, to the question “How can GIRoA and its partners improve and leverage their influence capability to mobilize the population?”

Potential Strategic Narrative: Peace, Hope, Self-Governance

As a foreigner, developing a strategic narrative for Afghanistan is challenging, to say the least. Thus, some initial caveats are necessary to inform the discussion. First, a group of American special operations officers developed the following narrative, based on a compilation of information from the Afghan Ambassador to the United States, the Afghan National Peace and Development Framework, western experts on Afghanistan, academic research, and deployment experience in Afghanistan. Second, it has not been vetted by Afghans for its salience or validity within Afghan society, culture, and history. It undoubtedly has a western bias. That said, while some supporting arguments may be flawed or require refinement, the main arguments are strong and, arguably, span cultures worldwide. The point is to consider the essence of the main ideas – peace, hope, and self-governance – and work with the Afghans to refine and implement them in a culturally attuned and effective manner.

Building on recommendations outlined in the previous section, this proposed narrative attempts to reach the emotional domain and leverage the power of Islam, when possible. Its components are intended to support a long-term strategy in Afghanistan, beginning with establishing peace, which, if achieved, will permit reform, development, and ultimately allow self-governance. The narrative also attempts to provide purpose and direction for the audience, to justify GIRoA’s actions, and to undermine the Taliban’s arguments. Based on the lack of direct Afghan involvement in the narrative development, there are shortcomings in two specific areas: leveraging Islam’s power in a culturally appropriate way and tying the arguments to Afghan history and social norms.

Peace is the First Step Toward Hope and Self-Governance:

- Peace is the greater *jihad* and GIRoA will fight forever to achieve it for the people of Afghanistan.
- The Taliban and terrorist groups are obstacles to peace. Their continued war against the Government and people of Afghanistan perpetuates your suffering (social pressure).
- Allah is merciful and forgives those who repent (reconciliation). GIRoA welcomes Taliban reconciliation and participation in the government and society.
- Security begets development and progress.

With Peace, There is Hope for a Better Future for You and Your Family:

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- After four decades of war, Afghans have forgotten hope; Afghanistan must find peace to restore hope and permit progress.¹¹⁸
- Our children have known only war in their lifetime. Give your family hope for a better future.
- Progress requires unity, patience, and temporary sacrifice.

GIRoA Supports Self-Governance:

- GIRoA is not a foreign puppet; the international community is supporting an Afghan-led strategy.
- GIRoA is committed to protecting the population's constitutional rights.
- GIRoA will hold its leaders accountable.
- Islam, tradition, and modernity can coexist in Afghanistan.
- Increased self-governance requires security.

Potential 'Creative Options' for Influence Operations:

Foment Uncertainty for Taliban Families in Pakistan: In interviews with senior Taliban Leaders, Theo Farrell and Michael Semple note the fact that the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) branch often uses the threat of deporting Taliban members families from Pakistan back to Afghanistan as leverage in the relationship.¹¹⁹ This presents an opportunity to implement a military deception or PSYOPs effort to foment uncertainty for Taliban member's families in Pakistan, which may serve two purposes. First, it could sow doubt between the Taliban and the ISI and create distance and distrust between the two entities. Second, it could put direct social pressure on Taliban leaders to consider settlement or reconciliation more thoroughly as a viable alternative. This potential effort is supported by Secretary of Defense James Mattis's recent visit to Saudi Arabia, where the two countries discussed the possibility of Saudi Arabia providing "safe haven to more moderate Taliban members who are prepared to negotiate for peace in Afghanistan."¹²⁰ Additionally, President Ghani's televised offer to bring two million Afghan refugees back from Pakistan supports a narrative that enduring safe haven in Pakistan is not a certainty.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ Roxanne Roberts, "What Does Afghanistan Need? Some Major Rebranding, Says its 32-year Old Ambassador," *Washington Post*, April 21, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/what-does-afghanistan-need-some-major-rebranding-says-its-32-year-old-ambassador/2016/04/21/2adb3a66-06e3-11e6-a12f-ea5aed7958dc_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.cfe7f100066a.

¹¹⁹ Theo Farrell and Michael Semple, "Ready for Peace?"

¹²⁰ "US, Saudi Arabia mull 'safehaven' for moderate Taliban," *The Nation*, March 24, 2018, <https://nation.com.pk/24-Mar-2018/us-saudi-arabia-mull-safe-haven-for-afghan-taliban>.

¹²¹ Ayaz Gul, "Ghani Vows Repatriation of All Afghans in Pakistan in Two Years," *Voice of America News*, February 17, 2018, <https://www.voanews.com/a/ghani-vows-rpatriation-afghan-refugees/4259079.html>. President Ghani also repeated this commitment in a televised CNN interview with Christine Amanpour. (Christine Amanpour, interview with President Ashraf Ghani, *CNN*, March 1, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/videos/world/2018/03/01/afghanistan-ashraf-ghani-amanpour.cnn>.)

Increase Social Pressure on Taliban to Pursue Peace: President Ghani’s peace overture in March 2017 has effectively undermined nearly all of the Taliban’s remaining reasons to continue fighting. There is potential to start (or more likely, continue) an influence campaign to express to the population that the Taliban are the single obstacle between the population a better way of life, achieved through government reform and economic development. This campaign should target specific Taliban leaders – likely the moderates who are more susceptible to striking a deal – and the populations within their immediate sphere of influence. Ultimately, the idea is to create a suffocating degree of social pressure on a single Taliban leader to force individual and group reconciliation at localized levels. This process could be repeated sequentially across the country to avoid overloading the reconciliation apparatus, or it could be simultaneously employed in different parts of Afghanistan. The team recommends starting in the least contested areas as confidence-building targets to prove the concept and make improvements before a wider rollout.

Support to Political Inclusion: Assuming GIRoA and the Taliban reach some form of political settlement or reconciliation, the Taliban and its constituents will expect tangible evidence of political inclusion to validate their compromise with GIRoA and ensure a durable peace. GIRoA and its partners may consider a non-attributable influence campaign to support the campaigning and ultimate election of ‘moderate’ Taliban politicians. There are three ways of approaching this. The first would be to encourage specific members of the Taliban to run for elected office (or even directly appoint them) and support their campaign clandestinely via information operations. This involves a high degree of risk, as missteps will compromise the integrity of the election and the broad perception of GIRoA’s efforts to promote inclusivity. A middle ground approach would allow the potential candidates to organically pursue elected office, and then leverage influence operations to support these candidates, again, clandestinely. The third, and least risky approach involves GIRoA taking a “wait and see” approach, allowing Taliban members to be elected organically and then highlighting their election and inclusion in the political system through a robust public information campaign.

Prep the Battlefield: U.S. and Afghan influence operations appear reactive in nature, focus almost entirely on near-term execution, and lack a long-term strategy for influence. Influence operations should prepare the battlefield for the successful implementation of SOF (or boarder U.S. and Afghan) strategy. The United States would never execute a kinetic operation without preparatory fires, doesn’t the same principle apply to non-kinetic actions? To do this, before any new program or action is rolled out, it requires a substantive messaging (public information) campaign to explain the purpose, function, goals, etc., of the program or action to prepare the environment and promote realistic expectations within the population. The pre-rollout messaging period can also buy space and time for the government to plan and resource the program, while simultaneously improving popular perception, arguably, without the government having done anything. That said, increasing knowledge of programs will also increase the cost of failure, so GIRoA and its partners must follow through on these promises or suffer the

consequences and result in loss of credibility. This type of preparatory public information campaign would have relevance to programs and activities relating to reconciliation, reintegration, Taliban inclusion both politically and societally, economic development projects, and almost any political or social reform.

Mass Media in Denied Areas: As previously discussed, GIROA has limited access to Taliban-controlled areas in the rural portions of Afghanistan. Although radio infrastructure exists in some areas, the towers are susceptible to sabotage or Taliban control. Therefore, penetration of these areas relies on word of mouth or other non-technical means. A potential option to penetrate these areas is satellite-based radio transmission. The dilemma is that while large numbers of FM radio receivers exist, they are incompatible with the current satellite radio transmitters which operate on higher frequency bandwidths. Employing satellite transmission would require widespread distribution of higher frequency receivers or the development and production of FM-capable satellites, which would require time and money.¹²² While access to the space-based technology such as satellite communication and satellite-radio was previously off-limits to only the highest of bidders, recent advances in small satellite technology such as cube satellites (CubeSats) and nanosatellites may present a new opportunity. The small size of CubeSats makes them ideal for customized payloads and innovation. With this idea in mind, a constellation of nanosatellites could be tailored to provide FM radio to rural Afghan populations. A single satellite from approximately 35,000 km in either geostationary or geosynchronous orbit could provide coverage to all of Afghanistan. Alternatively, a larger constellation of nanosatellites from low Earth orbit (LEO) or Medium Earth Orbit (MEO) could provide coverage to Afghanistan, but with more satellites from a closer range. Obviously, there are both physical and monetary constraints when developing space-based communications technology; however, if developed, these systems could have potential utility in Afghanistan, as well as other regions of the world.

ANATF Restructure and Building Trust: Related to the previous point, the down-sizing of the ANA and rollout of the Afghan National Army Territorial Force (ANATF) will require a considerable preparatory influence campaign to build an initial degree of trust and confidence in the new institution. In conjunction with the public messaging campaign, the Afghan National Army Special Forces (ANASF), who already enjoy a great deal of popular trust and confidence, could be employed as advisors to the ANATF while they are being stood up and begin initial operations. The ANASF are considered the most trusted security force in Afghanistan. As such, their integration and advisory relationship with the ANATF could transfer legitimacy by proxy to the ANATF. Additionally, the ANASF have the combat and counterinsurgency skills to develop the ANATF into legitimate and capable 'hold' forces within Afghanistan's provinces. Beyond

¹²² National Research Council, *Antennas, Satellite Broadcasting, and Emergency Preparedness for the Voice of America*, (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 1988), p. 24-59, <https://doi.org/10.17226/10444>. Although somewhat dated, this chapter provides thoughts on the use of satellite broadcasting in support of Voice of America's operations.

the implications for influence operations, the relationship would likely increase the effectiveness and capability of the ANATF, resulting in a more effective and resilient force.

ASSF and Taliban TV Series: Another idea is a television show based on the Commandos or ANASF, that depicts their story, and possibly the experience of Taliban fighters, to provide context to the ethical and moral challenges that both sides face. The show's plot should parallel the progress of the campaign, e.g., during the reconciliation phase; it should depict challenges and narratives of that phase. Regarding the Taliban characters in the show, the storyline should validate their legitimate grievances, while offering alternative narratives for addressing those grievances, such as reintegration, peaceful protest, and political participation, as opposed to violence. Afghanistan is inherently a warrior culture; thus, this type of show would likely be popular in Afghanistan and draw a large audience. The challenge would be increasing access to it. A YouTube series (or similar alternative) may present an option. The cellular giant, Roshan, has partnered with Wikimedia to provide free cellular access to Wikimedia's website.¹²³ A similar arrangement could be used to grant access to this program. Other options are radio or television shows, which may be more accessible to rural populations. There is a precedent for a show like this: Eagle 4, which followed the Afghan Police. It would be helpful to dissect the execution and termination of this program to determine best practices and lessons learned.

Conclusion

To summarize, effectively leveraging the power of influence operations will require Afghanistan and its partners to establish a unified narrative that supports GIRoA's long-term strategy. The narrative employed should target the emotional domain and leverage Islam and culture in its favor, while undermining the Taliban narrative. Internally, U.S. forces should prioritize influence operations, assist the Afghans to improve their influence capabilities, and develop a long-term strategy for execution, as opposed to the current, more reactive, model which focuses predominantly on near-term planning and execution. Beyond simply pointing out challenges and issues, the research team offered a narrative – peace, hope, self-governance – which aligns with the plan outlined in President Ghani's Afghan National Peace and Development Framework. Finally, the research team provided potential ideas for incorporation into larger influence campaigns.

As previously stated, the narrative and influence operations are the most difficult and most important part of the strategy in Afghanistan. As such, this team recommends a continued dialogue between NPS's DA and SOJTF-A to augment this initial exploration into such a critical topic. In light of this recommendation, SOJTF-A could leverage future NPS directed studies to expand on one or more of the initial ideas presented in this paper, conduct an organizational design assessment of the Military Information Support Task Force- Afghanistan (MISTF-A),

¹²³ Bethan Mckernan, "Afghans to get free access to Wikipedia," *Independent*, October, 9, 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/afghanistan-wikipedia-free-access-data-usage-internet-roshan-a7990906.html>

assess existing Afghan influence capabilities and organizations, or develop considerations for measuring the effectiveness of influence operations.

Less-Developed Creative Solutions

Creative Solutions for External Influences in Afghanistan

Security and Professional Military Education Exchanges

As the internal security situation in Afghanistan improves post-2020, the ANDSF should seek opportunities to increase military interoperability with regional and international partners through regional exercises and professional military education exchanges. During initial stages, officers are the main target audience but should develop to include noncommissioned officers and enlisted soldiers. In coordination with the U.S. Embassy, Afghan service members will increase attendance at U.S., regional, and international military schools beyond tactical level courses (Ranger, Flight School, and Air Assault) with more emphasis on professional military education (Basic Officer Leadership Course, Captain's Career Course, Intermediate Level Education, and Senior Service College). The operational impact of this initiative would allow Afghan service members to gain a better understanding of regional challenges beyond Afghanistan's borders and formally educate Afghan leaders on military strategy, which the ANDSF enterprise cannot sufficiently provide at this time. The strategic goal of security and professional military education exchanges is that the ASSF will be a contributing force to the regional CT effort outside of Afghanistan, executing foreign internal defense (FID), counter-narcotics, and Joint Combined Exchange Training (JCET) style missions to support regional partners, further increasing regional partners' dependence on Afghanistan. Additionally, the relationships developed during security and professional military education exchanges will posture Afghanistan as a contributing nation in future battlefields.

Regional Burden Sharing for Demobilization and Reintegration Initiatives

The coalition could challenge regional states to share the burden for demobilization and reintegration efforts for both former insurgents and Afghan security forces. For example, burden sharing for the 'Afghan GI Bill' could come in many forms:

- Simple monetary provisions earmarked for GIRoA programs.
- Regional states could open their technical universities to accept former members of the security forces. Neighboring states would foot the bill for tuition, room, and board.
- Regional states could construct, staff, and fiscally support technical universities in each of the regions. These universities could possibly be co-located (or near) the Corps HQ in each region to streamline the transition process. Regionalization would permit students to travel home more often. On the other hand, consolidating it to one to three national institutions would enhance oversight, accountability and control of the curriculum. This

would also reduce the overall cost by limiting the construction and logistical requirements (lodging, transportation, facilities, administrative staff, and sustainment).

- The technical specialties should be rooted in emerging or developing markets identified by GIROA's National Peace and Framework (agro-industry, technology, and mineral extraction). Where Afghanistan does not have a functioning industry, regional states could offer internships in their countries to expose graduates to functioning examples that could be employed in Afghanistan.

Regarding reintegrating insurgents and the Afghan 'Civil Conservation Corps,' regional states could be asked to fund and manage the projects while employing former insurgents as the workforce. The projects proposed should support the mutual interests of both countries. For example, Iran could fund projects to make Afghanistan's canals, dams and water distribution mechanisms more efficient, which would help mitigate the ongoing water dispute between the two countries. China's One Belt, One Road initiative and the Indian-Iranian agreement regarding the Chabahar Port present opportunities to improve Afghanistan's road and logistical infrastructure in the northwest. These efforts would benefit India, China, Iran, and Afghanistan. Finally, China has already suggested incorporating Afghanistan into its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiative. Major obstacles to this initiative are the AF-PAK dispute over permitting terrorist safe havens and the United States' fear of permitting increased Chinese influence in the region.¹²⁴ This effort, coupled with joint AF-PAK targeting initiatives could pave the way for improved relations.

Creative Solutions for Governance

Defining the Division of Labor Between DoS and DoD

The current division of labor between State and the military is ill-defined. If current strategies are successful, the post-2020 environment will likely require a balanced approach to internal defense and development, which will likely necessitate DoS to assume a lead role in Afghanistan. In preparation for this transition, the military should advocate for congressional legislation that clearly defines DoS' mission, function, and funding levels for post-2020 Afghanistan. If left unchecked, the military will continue to focus on the security line of effort. Without support from political and economic initiatives, those hard-won security gains will erode rapidly.

Additionally, DoD and DoS must reach a compromise on which entity is responsible for governance. This will likely require congressional legislation to mandate implementation. Traditionally, this is considered a DoS role, but DoS favors 'elite diplomacy' and is ill-manned and resourced to facilitate governance below the national level. In the absence of any other

¹²⁴ Masood Saifullah, "Can Afghanistan Join the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor?," *Deutsche Well*, January 10, 2018, <http://www.dw.com/en/can-afghanistan-join-china-pakistan-economic-corridor/a-42094595>.

capable entity, the military often assumes this role, but, for the most part, is ill-trained to execute this difficult task. Although formalizing this function may not fix the problems in Afghanistan, it may better posture the U.S. government for future interventions of this nature.¹²⁵

Regional Interagency Political Advisory Platforms to Support an IDAD strategy

While security is a major challenge to stability in Afghanistan, inadequate governance and internal politics are often the precipitants to security challenges. Unified action platforms would combine U.S. elements to coordinate, track, and facilitate progress in the security, governance, and development lines of effort. This a regionally distributed whole-of-government platform would gather intelligence, and assess and manage a balanced approach to IDAD in Afghanistan. Currently, the U.S. government efforts in Afghanistan are disjointed and military-centric, requiring reorganization to facilitate a more balanced approach. Based on the security threat and consolidation toward Kabul other urban hubs, the majority of non-military U.S. elements work from Kabul, relying on indigenous or other intermediaries for information and to carry out the execution of U.S.-sponsored programs.

In terms of organization, each platform would be tailor-made for its respective region, adding to or taking away entities as the situation evolves. Ideally, the platform would combine elements from the military, Department of State, USAID, and the Central Intelligence Agency, with a small support staff capable of analyzing and disseminating intelligence relevant to each line of effort. Members of the platforms should be vetted before assignment for experience and the presences of attributes necessary to advise indigenous officials (empathy, interest, etc.).

Regarding function, the platform would be responsible for maintaining awareness of internal politics and security challenges of a region and reporting those changes to the national level headquarters, to promote improved situational understanding. When necessary, the element could act as an intermediary between the central government and regional power brokers to resolve conflicts.

Limited Judicial authority for Military Officers

In rural areas of Afghanistan, there are many informal forms of governance able to mediate disputes, but there is a lack of central government presence and often a backlog in the district court system. Granting military officers the authority to certify decisions made by informal mediators on civil disputes that reside below a defined threshold would reduce the backlog. This practice would also tie these informal practices to the government until a more ordered policy

¹²⁵ For more information on this topic reference the following articles see Renanah Miles, "The Foreign Policy Essay: The Many Hurdles to U.S. Stabilization Operations," *Lawfare*, February, 2, 2014, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/foreign-policy-essay-many-hurdles-us-stabilization-operations> and Daniel Byman, "Why the United States won't do governance," *The Brookings Institution*, February 7, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/02/07/why-the-united-states-wont-do-governance/>.

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can be implemented to incorporate the informal governance systems into the formalized central structure.

Increasing Afghan Funding of Afghan Security Forces

U.S. and NATO countries currently provide the bulk of funding for Afghan Security Forces. To ensure that budget decisions by western countries do not affect success in Afghanistan, the Afghan government should work to increase its burden sharing of the budget for security forces. One way to do this would be dedicating a portion of revenue from large projects such as TAPI to security forces. These projects will require a significant security effort to secure them and should help pay for security in Afghanistan. Tied to an idea in the Security/Economic variables, the government could also encourage mobile banking and tax the mobile banking system. Currently, the government has limited sources of tax revenue – mainly taxes on mobile phone services and taxes on imports. By taxing mobile banking, the source of revenue would be spread out over all transactions. A third way to potentially make the Afghan security forces more sustainable would be to establish domestic defense industries such as ammunition and small arms manufacturers. These industries could provide cheaper sources of equipment and sustainment than paying to import foreign products. The industries could also be taxed and provide revenue to the government.

Focus on Select Programs

Often, GIRoA exceeds its capability and capacity to effectively operate and manage government programs. Rather than ineffectively managing many government programs poorly, GIRoA should instead prioritize the most important programs and make sure that they are successful.

Approval ratings for officials

GIRoA should consider administering polls, such as those conducted in the United States, to determine approval ratings of government officials, offices, and initiatives. This could serve as a metric of perceived effectiveness and performance and would reinforce the idea that the central government listens to and is responsive to the population, creating greater legitimacy for the government.

Creative Solutions for How “We” Operate

Change SOJTF-A’s Organizational Design to Reflect the Environment and Limit Bureaucracy

SOJTF-A’s organizational structure should match the environment, which is both complex and dynamic. This will require flexibility within the organization, capable of decentralized decision making and inter-organizational connectivity to react to rapid changes on the ground. Such flexibility will require clear purpose and direction from a central authority; possibly in the

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form of an organizational vision and/or culture, which can be used to regulate autonomous action. However, this structure will require more efficient reporting and feedback mechanisms.

SOJTF-A or the higher headquarters should develop a national level plan with general guidance for the regional entities. This must be a long-term plan (5-10 years) that is not affected by rapid changes in personnel and commanders. Subordinate headquarters should flesh out the ‘micro-strategies’ and execute them to support the larger plan. Basically, make mission command work the way it is supposed to. SOJTF-A should decentralize authority and decision making down to the regional level, when possible, such as with an AOB or the proposed sub-national interagency platforms (SNIPs). To create unity of effort, SOJTF-A should normalize portions of deployment preparation to create a common frame of reference, e.g., something similar to Village Stability Operations (VSO) week. This applies to the team/AOB level, as well as staffs, conventional, SOF, and IA personnel. Finally, reduce the number of General Officer Billets in Afghanistan. For example, send RSM home, and transition to an IDAD and SOF environment.

Increase the Continuity of Strategy and Personnel

To create greater continuity of effort through rotations, the team developed three potential solutions:

- Create a three-year Afghan rotation program, which deploys units specifically to Afghanistan on-and-off for three years. The elements would work with their sister-teams to internally manage deployment cycles during that three years. There should be overlap between the teams; a couple of personnel, possibly to include a key leader, would arrive late to their teams’ deployment and continue to the mid-point of the next team’s deployment to promote continuity. This would ensure a common operating picture between the teams and increase the likelihood that the replacement team continues the existing strategy, only incorporating changes based on changes in the environment.
- “SOF ACPAK Hands” would be a long-term commitment that would place experienced field grades in Afghanistan. This would require a selection program and a host of non-monetary incentives to entice quality officers into the program. Non-monetary incentives may include choice of duty location, academic opportunity, relaxed grooming standards when possible, 60 days of leave, etc.
- A third option to increase continuity and experience without consuming SOF billets would be to employ contractors.

Creative Solutions for How “We” Partner

Getting Beyond the One Year Budget Cycle

U.S. forces in Afghanistan fight an annual battle to sustain funding to maintain and grow Afghan forces. The Afghan government feels the need to cater to U.S. demands to ensure that

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funding of the Afghan security forces continues. Both situations create negative consequences for the conflict in Afghanistan. The first issue presents a constant threat that an underfunded year could derail progress made. The second issue causes complications because it makes GIRoA appear beholden to the United States and not independent. This feeds into the Taliban narrative that the Afghan government is a puppet of the United States.

To get beyond this budget cycle, the United States should commit to funding for the long-term. Past examples include Plan Colombia or military assistance provided to countries as part of a treaty, such as Egypt following the 1979 Israel-Egypt treaty. A treaty or other agreement may prove necessary to ensure that domestic politics do not underfund the mission in Afghanistan in a critical year when the progress is delicate and reversible. Afghanistan could then rely on the funding while charting its course politically.

Reduction in U.S. Troop Levels

The current and anticipated U.S. mission in Afghanistan does not warrant a significant footprint. Given the emphasis on the U.S. military fulfilling an advisory role with SOF providing the preponderance of the effort, there is potential to reduce troop levels while maintaining acceptable capabilities. Bearing in mind the possibility of the United States committing to a long-term presence in Afghanistan, the military should shift towards advising and partnering primarily at the operational and strategic levels. This would entail reducing the frequency of advisors accompanying partners on missions at the tactical level and raising the threshold for when direct U.S. involvement in combat operations is necessary. A small number of advisors should remain at the Special Operations Kandak (SOK), or battalion, level to advise the commander and staff, as well as facilitate coordination with its Afghan higher headquarters and coalition assets. The majority of advisors and effort should reside at the Special Operations Brigade (SOB) level. This shift in effort will force the Afghans to become more independent rather than foster continued reliance on American military capabilities. The shift will also reduce the requirement for U.S. troops, contributing to better dwell time or commitment elsewhere in support of national objectives.

Creative Solutions for Security

Implementation of the ANATF

The ANATF appears to address the demand for local security forces capable of extending GIRoA influence and presence while accommodating Afghanistan's tribal culture. The program, however, should start in predominantly GIRoA-controlled and lightly contested regions. To increase the likelihood of the program's proper implementation and longevity, it must enjoy early success and leverage initial experiences to identify friction points. To ensure competence and control over the force, the ANATF can assume a National Guard construct. In doing so, the ANA will have an obligation to conduct periodic training events with the ANATF and exert full

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oversight of the program. In this manner, the ANATF members should be part-time defenders used as needed, allowing them to continue living normal civilian lives within their communities. This may facilitate recruitment, encourage “buy-in” or acceptance by the community, and allow for normal life and business to continue.

ANA Construction Battalions

Following the FY19 fighting season, U.S. forces should deploy and attach to appropriate and designated ANA units in each operational region to establish and support a force training and transition program that will ultimately result in a restructuring of up to one-third of current ANA forces into fully capable construction and infrastructure development units. The purpose of training, and initial advise and assist efforts, will be to qualify and equip ANA construction battalions to conduct unilateral engineering, civil service, and infrastructure development projects directed by their respective ANA headquarters. This intent will be achieved through a top-down training and rewards program in which project managers will be trained and certified to oversee necessary construction efforts. Then designated personnel will receive training, qualification, and necessary equipment to operate machinery and conduct specialized construction tasks such as plumbing and electrical work. The remainder of construction battalion personnel will be trained and oriented in their respective role of basic construction and infrastructure development. An incentive program should be instated that rewards commitment, hard work, and potential with higher-level training and qualifications that are accompanied by special pay increases. However, these qualifications would require retraining or recertification to ensure individuals do not seek basic (and insufficient) qualifications in multiple areas simply to garner pay increases.

This force transition will provide GIRoA and the ANA with a highly beneficial capability that will complement its effective combat power as well as enable development and reconstruction efforts in secured areas with the ultimate objective of enabling progress as deemed appropriate. While this force training and transition will be resource intensive, its long-term payoffs for Afghan development and increased popular support for the central government can be highly beneficial in enabling sustainable stability.

Legitimize the Opium Trade

Afghanistan is the largest producer of opium in the world, creating a funding stream for the Taliban, as well as contributing to crime and social issues across the globe through smuggling and heroin distribution. Past opium eradication efforts have largely proven ineffective, resource intensive, and often alienate the local farmers trying to maintain a livelihood. Although controversial and counter to U.S. Policy, GIRoA should consider legitimizing the opium trade through strict regulation and licensing, allowing nations to purchase opium for medical production. In doing so, the Taliban is largely denied opium as a revenue stream, while increasing its revenue, farmers can continue growing opium to support their families, and the

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Afghan economy benefits from international investment. Furthermore, such a program may reduce the amount of opium illegally exiting Afghanistan for heroin production. As previously stated, the idea, which was first floated in 2007 and reinvigorated more recently, is controversial to say the least.¹²⁶ Despite the success of Nixon era initiatives in Turkey and India that may have application in Afghanistan, critics argue that there is an insufficient international demand, that the control apparatus required is beyond Afghan capacity, and that the profit for individual farmers is drastically lower than black market sales.¹²⁷ That said, the team believes the idea should be reconsidered for its potential viability at a minimum.

Improving Security through the ANDSF Structure

According to the U.S. Army doctrinal manual on Counterinsurgency (COIN), FM 3-24, twenty counterinsurgents per 1000 residents is considered the minimum troop density required for effective COIN operations. As with any doctrinal rules, this fixed ratio remains dependent upon the local security, political, economic, and information contexts of the environment. When structuring future Afghan security forces, decision-makers must understand that the country will not face existential threats from state actors. On the contrary, Afghanistan's greatest threats to security are actions initiated and executed by malign non-actors (VEOs) from within or just across Afghanistan's borders. With an internal focus on the threat to Afghanistan's stability, the team recommends investing in a large local security force (minimum 85 percent of total forces) and a small clearance force (maximum 15 percent of total forces). Using the current construct, every ANDSF besides the ASSF will consolidate under the command of a local security apparatus. These local security forces should be controlled by local authorities (provincial level and below), with the primary purpose of projecting the government's influence by providing daily security for the population and denying safe haven for VEOs around Afghanistan. ASSF units will maintain a more lethal capability to conduct targeted clearance operations in support of the local security forces to destroy enemy combatants. Additionally, ASSF units should remain at the provincial level to avoid misuse and ensure optimization of forces.

Improving ANDSF Effectiveness through Afghan Youth

Volunteer militaries require a large pool of quality youth to recruit from in order to be effective. To be a quality recruit, an individual would ideally have graduated from secondary education, possess a high level of fitness, and a desire to serve. Specific jobs may require other

¹²⁶ Adam Wunische, "Why Legalizing Opium Won't Work for Afghanistan" *The Diplomat*, January 5, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/01/legalizing-opium-wont-work-for-afghanistan/>; Sohrab Ramaty "A Solution For Afghanistan's Opium Crisis?," *The Diplomat*, December 2, 2014, <https://thediplomat.com/2014/12/a-solution-for-afghanistans-opium-crisis/>

¹²⁷ U.S. Department of State, "U.S. Opposes Efforts to Legalize Opium: The Rationale Against Legalization," U.S. Department of State Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, February 20, 2007. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/inl/rls/rpt/80734.htm>

attributes. ANDSF suffers from a young population that has historically had a high level of illiteracy and lack of education. This ignorance extends to skills such as map reading and navigation. Fitness levels vary in the population, but a dearth of organized sports, poor nutrition, and a lack of fitness education cause issues for many. By focusing on the Afghan youth, GIROA could create a higher quality pool of recruits for the ANDSF. Specifically, activities such as Boy/Girl Scouts or organized sports could be more inexpensive than educational programs and provide useful skills and fitness. These programs could also be used to promote national unity and a spirit of service in youth.

Improving Security through VEO Finance Targeting

Recent targeting of Taliban narcotics factories demonstrates a desire to deprive the Taliban of its funding sources. Beyond opium, the Taliban leverage a variety of illegal and black-market industries to fund their operations, such as timber, gems, and government spending programs. Primarily, these streams of revenue occur in regions the Taliban controls. By targeting these funding sources, the Coalition may have greater effects on insurgent recruiting and operations than simply targeting Taliban personnel. Because the Taliban control the areas in which they operate these industries, this could help prioritize districts for ANDSF to retake, by focusing on the Taliban's revenue generation areas. A rudimentary analysis appears to show a correlation between Afghan natural resources and the areas the Taliban have been attempting to consolidate control over, which potentially highlights a critical enemy requirement or center of gravity.¹²⁸

Another area that could receive focus is transitioning monetary transactions in Afghanistan to electronic transfers through cell phones (mobile banking). By shifting most transactions to this method, it reduces the opportunity for the Taliban to engage in illegal industries. It improves the security of the money that Afghans have, preventing them from being extorted or from bribery. While these activities may still go on, it will be easier to track the transactions and identify the perpetrators.

Improving Security through an Emergency System for Allocating Resources and Information Dissemination

One of the major challenges of any government is to be able to rapidly respond to the needs of the people. These needs vary from emergency services to social services, and they fluctuate from location to location. Even knowing what these needs can be extremely challenging, and traditional door-to-door surveys could prove problematic and time-consuming, especially in Afghanistan.

¹²⁸ "Addendum to SIGAR's January 2018 Quarterly Report to the United States Congress," *Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction*, February 2018, p. 2, https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/Addendum_2018-01-30qr.pdf; Shamim Niazi, "To Build Peace, Confront Afghanistan's Natural Resource Paradox," *The Woodrow Wilson Center's New Security Beat*, September 13, 2016, <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2013/09/build-peace-confront-afghanistans-natural-resource-paradox/>. See the map of natural resource locations in Afghanistan.

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The proliferation of cell phones and even smartphones have reached even some of the most remote areas of Afghanistan. Developing a one-stop-shop, easy-to-use application that doesn't require any literacy to articulate the concerns and sentiment in your village, or even to request help, could be at the fingertips of every Afghan village. It would require a catchy name that has meaning or significance to the Afghans, such as Synchronized Help for Urban and Rural Afghans (SHURA): Information dissemination system and application.

This application would be connected to government officials, security personnel, and military officials that would enable them to more effectively respond to the needs of their people at multiple governance levels. For example, a villager reports that there are Taliban in his village and he would like security forces to respond. At the local level, security personnel would respond. But at the district and the provincial level, they could collect trends and better allocate resources to the local areas that need it. Similarly, at the national level, GIRoA would be able to see now what districts and provinces on which they need to focus. The synchronization that would be created across a traditionally centralized government would help it become more effective and more responsive to the needs of the people. This idea extends beyond emergency situations and could also apply to non-security services such as trash removal or a lack of food or water.

This would have to be Afghan developed with the assistance of tech developers to make it user-friendly and illiterate friendly. Additionally, GIRoA would need to develop a more robust cellular service throughout Afghanistan to ensure most of the population can use the application and service.

ANATF Transition and Rethinking ANASF's mission and function

As part of the ASSF restructure, ANASF has become its command, outside of Commando control. The ANASF should use this opportunity to assume combat advisory and reconnaissance missions, more akin to U.S. Special Forces, vice Rangers or Afghan Commandos. ANASF are reportedly partnering with ANA Corps; however, this group suggests that ANASF become advisors to the ANATF. First, the ASSF are considered the most trusted security force in Afghanistan. As such, their integration and advisory relationship with the ANATF could transfer legitimacy by proxy to the ANATF. Additionally, the ANASF have the combat and COIN skills to develop the ANATF into legitimate and capable 'hold' forces within Afghanistan's provinces.

The ANASF's partnership with the ANATF will allow them to simultaneously act as a reconnaissance element for the Commandos and GIRoA. Because the ANATF members are from the same provinces that they work in, this expanded access to networks and information that the ANASF could leverage to direct Commando operations. ANASF's role as advisors to the ANATF will assist integration with the Commandos', as the ANASF-Commando linkages are strong. Finally, as advisors, the ANASF can act as a neutral arbiter between the central government and regional leaders and power brokers to limit the co-option of ANATF forces into militia-like entities. At a minimum, the ANASF will be able to inform GIRoA regarding the

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political and ethnic atmospherics of these provinces. As part of the transition, the ANATF should begin in more secure districts and then expand to the more difficult districts. This will increase the likelihood of long-term success of the organization.

Creative Solutions for Influence Operations

Increasing Access to the Afghan Government's Narrative

There will likely be significant changes to the communication infrastructure in Afghanistan in the near term and long term. After years of 2G cell service in much of the country, cellular technology companies in Afghanistan are investing heavily in 3G and 4G service. This started in the urban areas and along the Highway 1 but will rapidly spread to smaller urban areas and outlying provinces. The prospect for a major leap forward in internet service is also possible given the numerous plans for satellite internet service. Several companies (SpaceX, Google, Facebook) have proposed delivering satellite-based internet service for free to many parts of the world. These companies plan to fund these projects by having to pay customers that desire higher speeds or more bandwidth than offered with the free service. Some of the companies receive significant revenue through advertising and will see significant returns on an investment that could offer internet service to 4 billion people currently without it.

Based on the above discussion, GIRoA should begin to prepare now. Internationally successful social media applications such as Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter may currently reach only a small portion of the population. However, the rate at which these applications are adopted by the Afghan population could increase exponentially. The Taliban and ISIS-K have already demonstrated an ability to use technology to their advantage, and GIRoA should be prepared to compete.

In addition to preparing for the future communications environment, the government could seek to become an agent of change in this area to increase the audience that hears their narrative. In terms of cellular service, GIRoA currently taxes cellular companies significantly. This likely leads to reduced capital expenditure budgets for these companies that they would use to upgrade technology and expand service. In exchange for reduced taxes for a set period of time, the companies could commit to expansion of service. GIRoA could also investigate partnering with companies that plan to provide free satellite-based service to use Afghanistan as a demonstration of the power of the technology. Another option would be to subsidize internet or cell service.

There are also several potential drawbacks with this proposed solution. Cell service is expanding and improving in government-held areas, but the Taliban may disrupt plans to improve service in areas that they control or contest, currently over 40 percent of the country. Additionally, some research has pointed out that services such as cell phones tend to encourage people to communicate with other people in the same socio-economic circles and can contribute

to increased communal violence.¹²⁹ While Afghanistan is not experiencing civil war or ethnic conflict, it could cause increased divisiveness in Afghan politics. In view of this issue, the best option may be satellite-based radio. This option would decrease the negative consequences of increased social media but allow for the expansion of mass media from the government. It would also be difficult for the Taliban to counter this method in the areas that it controls.

Increasing the Effectiveness of Messaging in Afghanistan

One of the major pitfalls the United States faces in messaging in Afghanistan is approaching the problem as an external actor as the message does not appear genuine and does not resonate with the population. Any noticeable attribution from a third party can taint a message and render it ineffective. This is one of the major reasons that messaging in Afghanistan has been largely unsuccessful. For example, U.S. systems and processes produce many of the messages developed, even if they originated from GIRoA, clearly showing the U.S. hand by the high quality of the product. The resulting message can appear tainted to the population.

One way to eliminate any U.S. attribution to messaging products is for the United States to assist GIRoA in building an agency or department that will be able to self-produce messages and media that reinforce their messages. An example of this agency or organization would be that of the propaganda machines of WWII, where the governments of both the United States, United Kingdom, and Germany invested heavily in information operations. In the case of the United States, the Office of the Coordinator of Information, an intelligence and propaganda agency, was an effective way to engage in public diplomacy. Though this agency and concept were employed at the international level, GIRoA could develop a similar agency that is internally focused.

An additional creative solution is to crowdsource messaging using the Afghan population. The United States could fund a GIRoA program that incentivizes Afghan production of messages that support the government's narrative. Both national and local competitions would be held with prizes for the top three submissions of Afghans that produce the best messages in the form of videos, pictures telling a story, poems, or other mediums that resonate in Afghan culture. These winning messages would then be used by GIRoA to reinforce the narrative and drive operations, culminating with feedback based on the operations, which would then drive future messaging. This would be a cyclical process where U.S. attribution would be non-existent; GIRoA would have control over the selection of the best messages, and the population would have buy-in at both the local and national levels.

There is a multitude of logistical hurdles to overcome in the facilitation of this solution, but in concept, it could be something as simple as providing a teenage Afghan with a camera and ask them to document how the ANDSF have helped his family or village. Alternatively, one could target someone who has family members addicted to opium and asks them to show how

¹²⁹ T. Camber Warren, "Explosive Connections? Mass Media, Social Media, and the Geography of Collective Violence in African States," *Journal of Peace Research* 52, no. 3 (May 1, 2015), p. 297–311, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343314558102>.

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addiction affects their life. The possibilities are endless, but it provides a genuine aspect to the message that will support the narrative and resonate with other Afghans.

Finally, it is worth noting that the message may not be enough, and the way the message is delivered or marketed may also have a crucial impact. For this reason, GIRoA may need to consult with marketing companies to help advise on a marketing strategy to push and deliver the messages to the population. The hypothesis is that properly marketing crowdsourced messages through a centralized GIRoA information agency will result in increased effectiveness of messages and support the narrative, which will in-turn further lend to the security, stability, and prosperity of Afghanistan.

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