

COMMENTARY

Afghanistan in 2024: Muddling Through?

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This paper highlights trends in Afghan security and development, including capacities of Taliban and Al Qaeda insurgencies, national forces' casualty and desertion rates, and citizen rage spurred by abusive authorities, profiteering elites and ethnic leaders. In coming years, the unity central government may fall apart. As in Pakistan, U.S. targeted killings by drones and raids within Afghanistan may prove counter-productive, radicalizing civilians. While little is certain, a modest degree of successful stability and reconstruction may be achieved by 2024 – most large cities and many small towns may be controlled by the Kabul government, official corruption may decline, and conceivably the country may integrate into a regional economy shared with Iran, Russia, China, and India.

Introduction

Western forces deployed to Afghanistan more than thirteen years ago. The counterinsurgency and development effort that followed will enter a new phase in 2015 as most NATO combat troops withdraw, leaving a mixed situation at best. Donors have committed to assistance until 2024, so it's worth considering how Afghanistan will look in that year. It is impossible, of course, to predict precisely what Afghanistan will be like in 2024. This is just as it would have been impossible to foresee the specifics of the 9/11 attacks in 1991, or forecast the details of Yugoslavia's breakup as Tito lay dying in 1980. However, current trends do allow some tentative projections.

Military progress, political uncertainty

One critical determinant of conditions in 2024 will be whether Afghanistan's military can contain the Taliban once NATO departs.

The 2013 and 2014 fighting seasons, the last in which NATO played a combat role, offer some clues.

The Taliban is far from destroyed, still operates in significant strength, and poses an ongoing security challenge to many districts across Afghanistan. During the 2013 fighting season, the insurgents struck Afghanistan's south, east and northeast, determined to cow the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), intimidate civilians, and destroy confidence ahead of NATO's withdrawal. After initial success, they were defeated with heavy losses. ANSF recaptured lost districts, police re-established presence, and civil officials returned. Still recovering from this setback, in April 2014 the insurgents made little headway in attempts to disrupt the first round of presidential elections.

Coalition aircraft, maintenance, and medical support were a huge help to ANSF in 2013, and some units suffered heavily even with these enablers—almost 1200 soldiers and police were killed. Still, ANSF defeated the Taliban offensive with virtually no NATO combat troops engaged, and few embedded

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advisors. By 2013, moreover, every Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) had been closed for over a year, not a dollar of military stabilization funds had been spent in two years, and cities had been under Afghan civil police for more than three. In June 2013, ANSF assumed responsibility for the entire country, while coalition losses for 2013 were the lowest since 2005.

The 2014 campaign was harder. Initially lacking significant NATO air support, ANSF suffered heavily again, and desertion spiked. The Taliban, emboldened by the lack of NATO airpower, operated more openly, and in far larger groups, than in the last five years. In August 2014 they mounted an attack in Charkh district of Logar province, with 700 fighters—one of the largest insurgent attacks in the entire war. Taliban attacked almost every major city across Afghanistan. As in 2013, ANSF held the line, but could neither expel the Taliban from safe havens nor contain the insurgency. Thus, there are real questions as to whether ANSF can sustain the current high casualty and desertion rates, or succeed in containing the insurgency without external air support.

Despite the seriousness of these military problems, the political situation is even more uncertain. The Taliban have little chance of reconquering Afghanistan, while Afghan forces can only maintain security after 2014 if they have a stable and effective government, which they and their families consider worth fighting for. But there is considerable uncertainty that this will be the case. Key issues are the viability of the national unity government, local governance, rule of law and corruption.

After a relatively peaceful, but bitterly contested, second-round election in June, Ashraf Ghani finally emerged as President of a national unity government, while his opponent Abdullah Abdullah became Chief Executive—with responsibilities yet to be clearly defined. Ghani signed the Bilateral Security Agreement, guaranteeing NATO presence and U.S. and international aid,

shortly after his inauguration and re-opened a probe into the Kabul Bank corruption scandal, suggesting he will take corruption and governance seriously. But negotiations over cabinet formation are moving slowly, and unity governments have a checkered history in Afghanistan—it was the breakdown of a power-sharing deal in 1993 that provoked Afghanistan's civil war, enabling the Taliban's rise.

Hamid Karzai's role after 2014 also remains unclear. The former President is building a fortified mansion in Kabul, close to the presidential palace, at the previous headquarters of Afghanistan's intelligence service. He could play a disruptive role between now and 2024, as could ethnic or tribal opposition to the new government. Abdullah, for example, is of mixed Pashtun-Tajik ethnicity and a prominent former member of the Northern Alliance. Rashid Dostum, the new Vice President, is the original model of an Afghan warlord, and wields significant patronage and control within the Uzbek community. Thus, despite the welcome achievement of a unity government, a stable transition is far from certain—and not helped by the rapid exit of international forces at exactly the same time.

Corruption and Governance: a mixed picture

A second trend, which will determine much in Afghanistan over the next decade, is the decidedly mixed picture of corruption and governance.

Analysts debate whether Afghanistan's corruption and governance problems are endemic, or whether they were primarily caused by the tsunami of international cash that flowed into the country after 2001. I tend to think that the influx of vast amounts of poorly tracked cash into an economy with (initially) low absorptive capacity, poor accountability and weak infrastructure was a huge part of the problem. A succession of foreigners with good intentions, lots of money and firepower, but little knowledge of

Afghan society, became a source of revenue and power for Afghanistan's elite. People leveraged foreigners to settle scores, defeat their rivals, and enrich and empower themselves and their allies. Of course, traditional Afghan society included corruption—like any society—and the Taliban themselves engaged in corrupt and abusive activity before 2001. But the scale of corruption after 2001 was something else entirely.

Hamid Karzai was acceptable to the Bonn Conference as a compromise candidate precisely because he lacked a large personal power base. As interim President, he had to spend much of his early period in office trading control over government institutions in return for political support from powerful rivals. This created a dysfunctional governance structure, with different ministries controlled by rival factions and individuals who, by definition, were unwilling to work together. The 'sectoral lead' model of reconstruction, adopted at the Bonn conference, exacerbated this dysfunction by giving each rival ministry its own international sponsor. The lack of transparency allowed President Karzai—who had, in his personal gift, a huge number of official appointments—to cement his authority by placing himself at the head of a patronage network. While it's not clear that Karzai himself is corrupt, his family and political allies have enriched themselves through this system, and at the lower level it has become a mechanism for widespread abuses.

These abuses, in turn, have enraged the population, creating disillusionment in the Kabul government (and its international backers) and resentment against local conflict entrepreneurs—the Taliban and others call them 'country-sellers'—who've gained wealth and power through foreign presence. This ultimately empowered the Taliban, whose system of courts, taxation, dispute resolution, and shadow district governors, gives them more functional authority at the village level than the (often absent, ineffective, abusive or corrupt) government. Military progress alone, or transition to a new national

government in Kabul, will do little to change this local dynamic.

The good news is that if, indeed, international assistance has been a major driver of corruption, then as foreign funding dries up some abusive elite behavior may diminish. A government that depends more on taxation and less on foreign largesse has to be more responsive to its population; one that can't rely on the protection of foreign troops needs to take more account of its people's rights and desires. The bad news is that the last thirteen years created new elites, power brokers and resentments that will persist after 2014, and will be hard for the new government—however well intentioned—to undo. Thus the corruption, abuse and rage that create space for the Taliban's ultra-conservative law-and-order vigilantism may be a persistent feature of Afghanistan in 2024, and thus may continue to create grievances that the Taliban can exploit.

The Taliban (and maybe Al Qaeda) are here to stay

For the same reason, the Taliban are likely to be an enduring feature of the Afghan political landscape, whatever the ultimate outcome of the insurgency.

Most insurgencies last 20 to 30 years, some far longer. The mere fact that international troops are leaving won't end the conflict and, as we've seen, the Taliban are far from defeated. Indeed, their movement represents a strain of Afghan thought—a religiously conservative, Pashtun nationalist, xenophobic outlook that emphasizes clean, incorruptible, Islamic government, defined in traditionalist terms—that shows no signs of disappearing. Over the next decade a Taliban resurgence is far from unlikely. Indeed, the insurgents may simply have been waiting for international forces to leave, exploiting the fact that U.S. and NATO leaders have very helpfully told them exactly how long they needed to wait. Once ISAF is off the scene, and foreign military assistance has diminished, an escalating insurgency is entirely possible.

Even if this doesn't happen, we can expect to see significant pro-Taliban political activity, especially in Afghanistan's south and east, and across the northern Pashtun belt, for the foreseeable future. Political actors may prefer not to call themselves 'Taliban' or take orders from Quetta, but they represent a pro-Taliban outlook. One possible outcome may be that crypto-Taliban representatives end up controlling districts, as Provincial governors, in the Parliament, or even as Cabinet ministers. There's nothing inherently wrong with this: indeed, such power sharing may be a crucial part of an inclusive settlement of the conflict, and therefore necessary for future stability. But, it's hard to imagine Afghanistan a decade from now without significant Taliban influence.

For its part, Al Qaeda (AQ) may exploit ISAF's departure to re-establish itself in parts of the country—perhaps (given past patterns) in Kunar, Nuristan, north of Kajaki in Helmand, or areas of Khost, Zabul and Kandahar provinces. This may seem counter-intuitive: why would AQ give up a perfectly good safe haven in Pakistan, with excellent connectivity and a generally permissive environment, for remote, rural Afghanistan? But AQ did in fact move back into Nuristan and Kunar when ISAF withdrew in 2010-2011, and AQ leaders may maintain the intent to re-establish some form of safe haven in Afghanistan after 2014—while not relinquishing their Pakistani base.

The danger of AQ for Afghanistan (as distinct from the rest of the world) is not the presence of terrorists as such, but the U.S. reaction. President Obama's decision to draw down to 9,800 U.S. troops in country by the end of 2014, then 4,900 by the end of 2015, and no troops (outside a 'normal' embassy contingent) by the end of 2016 is essentially a slightly slower version of the 'zero option' once proposed by Vice President Biden. It means that only special operations, drone strikes, or covert action will remain in the U.S. counterterrorism arsenal within two years. The risk for Afghanistan is that the U.S. may

resort to the same kind of targeted killing program—with similar destabilizing and radicalizing effects—as it has applied in Pakistan.

A tough neighborhood

Developments in Pakistan, and Afghanistan's other neighbors, are the fourth and final trend to consider over the next decade. Again, this is a mixed picture.

Pakistan has been through a tumultuous period since 9/11, and despite—like Afghanistan, for the first time ever—achieving a peaceful, democratic transfer of power from one civilian government to another in 2013, has serious internal stability issues, including separatist insurgencies, terrorist safe havens, and the Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. As noted, U.S. counterterrorism (whatever its effect on AQ) has contributed to de-stabilization, radicalization and rising anti-Americanism. As of 2014 the latest in a long series of peace negotiations is underway between the Pakistani Taliban and the government. Should these succeed, the implications for Afghanistan may be negative—ceasefires in 2006 and 2009 saw surges in cross-border terrorist movement into Afghanistan, as fighters who were no longer tied down by the Pakistani military were free to cross over into Afghanistan. At the same time, the Pakistani Army's 2014 offensive left the Afghan Taliban relatively untouched, though it pushed some Pakistani Taliban across the frontier into Afghanistan. Like the Afghan Taliban and AQ, the Pakistani Taliban are here to stay, so that in a decade's time Afghanistan will probably still have a close but fraught relationship with its eastern neighbor.

China continues to sponsor Pakistan as part of its regional competition with India, but has generally played a positive economic role—via investment and infrastructure spending—in Afghanistan. President Ghani's first overseas visit will be to Beijing, as part of an effort to cement China's economic engagement with Afghanistan. Eurasian integration through the 'new silk road,' efforts to link the Chinese-built port at Gwadir in Pakistan with

China via the Karakoram Highway, and development of roads and infrastructure around the massive Chinese-owned copper mine at Aynak in Logar, give China an enduring economic and political stake in Afghanistan, and on balance this is likely to be a positive thing.

Likewise, Iran—despite having played a destabilizing role at times—has close economic ties with western cities such as Herat and with the Hazara and Tajik communities. Depending on the 2014 election results, closer relations with Iran are likely. President Karzai maintains close contacts in Iran, and reportedly receives cash payments from the Iranian regime, so it's hard to imagine that a future Afghan government would be any less willing to engage with Tehran. Iran, faced with a significant Afghan-sourced drug problem and restive ethnic minorities on its borders, has every reason to seek a cooperative relationship with Afghanistan, once American forces and influence have diminished.

The same is true of Russia, which, though not a neighbor, plays an outsize role in Afghanistan through its influence in central Asia, and is important to NATO through the Northern Distribution Network—ISAF's main supply route since the closing of supply lines through Pakistan in October 2011. Russia remains suspicious of American presence in Afghanistan and central Asia, and is expanding its influence in former Soviet Central Asia, but has no interest in an unstable Afghanistan. Indeed, Moscow has reinforced its military posture in the region in part to protect against a spillover of radicalization should Afghanistan collapse. Thus, Russia is likely to seek a more prominent (and not necessarily unhelpful) role in Afghanistan once ISAF departs.

Finally, India (though not a neighbor as such) has played, and can be expected to continue to play, a strong economic and political role in Afghanistan, primarily for regional geopolitical reasons—its confrontation with Pakistan on the one hand and competition with China on the other. India has (and will likely maintain) a very robust presence in

Afghanistan, with several very large consulates, significant investment and business interests, infrastructure projects and interest in regional trade. Balancing India, Pakistan and China will be key foreign policy challenges for the next Afghan government, as they are today.

As for most of its history, Afghanistan in 2024 is likely to find itself surrounded by powerful competing neighbors. For once, however, the interests of these neighbors (with the exception of some elements in Pakistan's national security establishment) may align with Afghanistan's need for peace, stability and economic development.

Conclusion: Afghanistan in 2024

Drawing this all together, what is the most likely scenario for Afghanistan in 2024?

In ten years the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, (the current regime, established in 2001) will almost certainly still be the government of Afghanistan. It will control Kabul, most large cities, many smaller towns, and the routes between them, but large tracts of the countryside may still lie outside its control (as for every previous Afghan government). The government is likely to be somewhat less corrupt and abusive than at present, though perhaps only marginally more effective at local-level administration. At that local level, there will remain an active and influential Taliban movement, perhaps benefiting from support (or fueled by instability) from Pakistan. This may generate an insurgency in the south and east of the country and across the Pashtun belt in the north, and will almost certainly include robust political activity, and pro-Taliban leaders may control some districts, provinces or even ministries. AQ will probably have a greater presence in Afghanistan than today, but this depends on the effectiveness and scope of U.S. counterterrorism, which (if it applies methods like Foreign Internal Defense) may be effective in containing AQ, but—if it relies on drones and raids, as in Pakistan and Yemen—may have a destabilizing effect. And finally, if

Afghanistan's neighbors continue to share an interest (despite their other competing goals) in a stable and peaceful Afghanistan, the country has every chance of integrating into the regional economy—albeit it will still need a huge amount of post-conflict reconstruction and economic development.

Again, none of this is a prediction: it is just a projection based on current trends. There's great uncertainty in any forecast of this kind, and much remains to be done in stabilizing Afghanistan and ensuring its future. Things might still unravel after 2015, perhaps quite quickly. As events in Iraq have shown all too clearly, too-rapid disengagement from a military intervention of this kind can result in a stunningly rapid collapse in the face of a resurgent enemy. Indeed, if the past decade teaches us nothing else, it demonstrates that unexpected shocks can transform whole regions in ways that are impossible to foresee.

In light of the hubris and overstated commitments of some Western leaders after the overthrow of the Taliban in 2001, and after thirteen years, thousands of lives and billions of dollars, this may seem a disappointing

outcome. But in terms of historical benchmarks of insurgency and post-conflict reconstruction, military conditions in Afghanistan are actually about as good as can be expected. The critical issue that determines the state of the country by 2024 will be whether international commitments—of money, advisors, technical support and other enablers—are honored in the longer term. If they are, there's every chance that Afghanistan in 2024 will be in a better position than today. If not, we could be in the tragically predictable (and currently avoidable) position of having to return after a collapse like the one we saw in Iraq in 2014, or—even worse—after another terrorist incident like 9/11.

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