

State, Security and Economy in Afghanistan: Current Challenges, Possible Solutions

The Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination (LISD) at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs convened the colloquium, "State, Security and Economy in Afghanistan: Current Challenges, Possible Solutions," on 16-18 November 2007 in Brussels, Belgium. The conference was funded in part by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the House of Liechtenstein, and the Government of Austria.

The colloquium brought together senior policymakers, academics, diplomats and representatives from Afghanistan and the region, the US and EU, as well as representatives of the private sector, civil-society institutions, the UN and other non-governmental organizations. Among the more than 60 high-level conference participants, presentations and keynote addresses were offered by Christopher Alexander, Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Afghanistan; Antonio Maria Costa, Executive Director of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime; Lt. Gen. Karl Eikenberry, Deputy Chair of the NATO Military Committee; Peter Feith, Deputy Director General of the EU Council Secretariat; Mohammad Karim Khalili, Vice-President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan; Prince Hans Adam II of Liechtenstein; James Moran, Asia Director of the European Commission; and Francesc Vendrell, EU Special Representative for Afghanistan. The meeting was chaired by Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, LISD Director.

Policy Recommendations

Consensus emerged from the conference that Afghanistan is not a "lost cause" and its security and development realities are not the same as and therefore should not be conflated with those of Iraq. While it is true that Afghanistan has made substantial progress since 2001 – especially in building a functioning parliament, increasing health services, and education – conference participants also concurred that critical issues remain. Democratic political institutions from the national to the local level remain underdeveloped, local perceptions of insecurity have increased substantially, an insurgency is mounting, suicide attacks are increasing, narcotics production has skyrocketed in some provinces, infrastructure and human capital development have been slow, the international community lacks a clear and common vision for Afghanistan, and a balance has yet to be found between international involvement and Afghan ownership in the country's ongoing state- and security-building efforts.

Conference participants expressed a sense of urgency, agreeing that while Afghanistan has immense potential, it is now at a critical juncture and its future can go in a positive or negative direction depending on how events transpire in the short-term. Intensified international involvement is essential. Participants



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identified three key issues that must be addressed in the short-term to prevent a deterioration of progress that has been made and to continue positive development in the long-term.

Political Reform

Afghanistan's government and its legitimacy are undermined by corruption. The insurgency in Afghanistan is being fueled by a lack of governance while underlying political problems hold security and other state-building and development efforts hostage. Within this context, government efficiency, decentralization and elections are considered the most pressing political reform issues.

At present, the nexus of governmental power in Afghanistan is Kabul. Yet many Afghans living in the provinces feel very much detached from the central government. Presidential appointments of provincial governors and district managers are regularly made without consideration of the needs and realities in individual locales. In an attempt to bolster security, resource distribution is often skewed toward unstable areas at the expense of local institutions and development needs in comparatively stable ones. Local perceptions of corruption, favoritism and nepotism in central government decision-making further undermine governmental legitimacy. Decentralization has the potential to strengthen ordinary Afghans' perceptions of having a stake in and ownership of their country's political processes and government institutions.

Internal security is another issue that influences trust in Afghanistan's government. Corrupt police, inadequately trained and equipped, and a corrupt Ministry of Interior contribute to the perception of a government incapable or unwilling to deal with the daily security environment. Intensified international assistance to train and equip police is urgently required.

With Afghan elections on the horizon, electoral reform issues loom large. The current single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system has undermined the development of a stable party system and fragmented the Parliament. If power is to be decentralized from Kabul and Parliament is to become more effective and responsive, this voting system must be changed. Furthermore, rules need to be developed to screen candidates. There are prominent individuals that are deemed to be criminals by the population who are currently serving in important governmental capacities. The inclusion of such people in the government further detracts from its legitimacy and for that reason there should be some form of transitional justice within the electoral system. Credible voter registration, an updated census, and coordination of other logistical issues for the 2009-2010 elections need to be undertaken now to ensure the integrity of upcoming elections and the legitimacy of their results.

Regional Relationships

From security to drug trafficking to economic development, trade and cooperation, Afghanistan's future cannot be safe or prosperous without a stable and peaceful region. Improved relations between Afghanistan and its neighbors must be predicated on shared concerns of security and economic development, while respecting Afghanistan's sovereignty. Consequently deteriorating political or security situations in one country would have devastating effects on the others.

Western policies have tended to "appease the strong and to push the weak" in the region. For instance, the US wants Afghanistan transformed into a stable country while simultaneously promoting President Musharraf and Pakistan as an ally in the war on terrorism and the fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. However there is an obvious tension between its democracy promotion in Afghanistan and other regional relationships. The US and the international community seem to lack a clear regional strategy and have been unsuccessful in addressing problems with the Afghan-Pakistan border and related security issues. This perpetuates uncertainty and insecurity. Pakistan's intent to control extremism in the northwest frontier provinces has been hampered by the perception among the Pakistani military and the people that the war across the border is not their war but rather an operation undertaken at the behest of the current US administration, or as part of an abstract global war on terrorism.

Iran, Afghanistan's western neighbor, has been supportive of "operation enduring freedom" and the Bonn process to rout the Taliban and eliminate Al Qaeda. However signs increasingly suggest that Tehran may hedge various options for the future and prepare a change in tactics in anticipation of a military strike against Iran. This would seriously destabilize Afghanistan.

India may have been insufficiently included in the broader regional process for Afghanistan's stability. Clearly the Kashmir problem plays a role as do Pakistani fears of encirclement and an India-US nuclear deal. But India's potential as a stabilizing, democratic force in the region could be leveraged against the destabilizing impact that crises in Pakistan and Iran could have on Afghanistan.

Security and International Priorities

The involvement of the international community is crucial for Afghanistan's present and future development. In terms of security, the international community must come to a consensus about what it is and is not willing to do and move forward based on this. Many states signal their continued commitment through their roles in ISAF and Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and consensus exists that NATO cannot afford to lose in Afghanistan. Yet the national caveats of NATO members prove challenging as nations restrict their forces operationally and approach their missions in particular provinces by individual interests and limitations. These caveats, which are sometimes hidden until

operations unfold, often make it difficult to move sufficient troops to respond on the ground. Member forces within the alliance should not have to be concerned as to whether or not their partners will support them in a difficult situation. There is also the political problem that heavy fighting tends to go on in Afghanistan's south and east resulting in unequal risk sharing among NATO forces in the comparatively calmer north and west.

Afghan patience with the presence of international forces will not last indefinitely. If international forces outstay their welcome or alienate local populations with military operations like air strikes that repeatedly cause civilian casualties, however, then there is a real risk that Afghan friendliness will be replaced by the more adverse alternative of Afghan enmity. To maintain a positive image of the international military presence and activities, it is important to balance and better coordinate them with civilian initiatives and to give an Afghan face to and facilitate more direct Afghan involvement in security initiatives conducted with ISAF support.

A fundamental question remains whether, and if so for how long, the international community is willing to maintain a central and active role in Afghanistan's security- and state-building process. There remains a sense that Afghanistan is still "winnable" but pressure mounts from domestic constituencies who want a finite involvement in the country and to see that Afghanistan has turned a corner. There are serious concerns that the international community, when faced with other crises or simply from donor fatigue, will lose patience with Afghanistan. Demonstrating Afghan capacity and competence, however, becomes difficult when these are determined by black-and-white categorizations of "victory" or "defeat" in security considerations, and in terms of "success" or "failure" for individual programs or country areas of responsibility. In this respect, current trends in media coverage are not always helpful.

The international community must be realistic about its objectives, contributions and long-term responsibilities. Unrealistic expectations have caused problems in the past. To forestall similar problems in the future the international community should assess what a best-case-scenario Afghanistan would look like and how it would function in 5, 10 and 20 years in the future, and then work backwards from that desirable future to realistically assess financial and material needs. Abandoning Afghanistan would be disastrous for the country, the region and beyond, and therefore cannot be an option.

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