

The Liechtenstein Colloquium on European and International Affairs Stability and Viability in Afghanistan: Building a Viable and Effective Afghan State

*Sponsored by the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination
at the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University*

As post-Taliban Afghanistan struggles to build a viable and secure state under President Hamid Karzai, a clear and urgent need exists for the international community to assist Karzai's government in building enduring domestic institutions that support the promotion of democracy, while improving the stability and security of this Asian country.

In March 2003, Princeton University's Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination (LISD) sponsored a colloquium entitled, "Stability and Viability in Afghanistan: Building A Viable And Effective Afghan State," held in Triesenberg, Liechtenstein, which brought together diplomats, government officials, academics, policy experts, and field practitioners to examine international and local best practices relevant for state and security building in Afghanistan—to be considered policy recommendations by Afghans themselves.

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Participants included Ambassador Robert Finn, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan; Ambassador David Johnson, Afghanistan Coordinator, U.S. Department of State; Afghanistan's Minister of Reconstruction, Dr. Amin Farhang; Hans-Ulrich Seidt, director, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Berlin; the European Union's special representative in Afghanistan Francesc Vendrell; Professor Amin Saikal, Australian National University; Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, director of the LISD and colloquium organizer; Princeton University faculty, and others. A special feature of the Liechtenstein Colloquium was its video conference link—via satellite—with Kabul, made possible by the World Bank's Global Distance Learning Network. Hedayat Amin Arsala, Vice President of Afghanistan, and Anne Tully, the World Bank's country director in Afghanistan, participated via the video conference link. The colloquium was funded by LISD, the Carnegie Corporation, and the government of Liechtenstein.



The three-day colloquium focused on the political history of Afghanistan, the main issues and lessons in building viable, democratic state systems, and lessons from international case studies on decentralization and nation-building, and their applicability to Afghanistan. In particular, the discussions focused on best practices in designing effective electoral systems and dealing with Afghanistan's unique regional power centers, warlords, ethnic groups, and traditional Afghan society.

This Liechtenstein colloquium was the first in a series of meetings as part of the LISD's project "Promoting Viability and Stability in Afghanistan and the Region," which runs through 2005. The participation of Afghan policymakers at this and other meetings is enabled through the World Bank's videoconferencing facilities and the LISD's working relationships with government officials, international organizations, and institutes in Kabul.

In Afghanistan and the region, the most pressing need for the country's future stability and viability is the creation of enduring state structures, which are accepted by the people. On the other hand, stability and security within Afghanistan and among its neighbors, and the capability to establish viable institutions is the prerequisite for the state's viability. Through a series of analyses, the project will cull consensus advice of the best policy direction for strengthening Afghanistan and the region's future.



Left: Colloquium participants met in Triesenberg, Liechtenstein, to discuss nation-building and security in Afghanistan.

Key Findings

Findings presented in this brief represent policy recommendations expressed as a whole by participants, even where consensus on key issues was not reached. However, unanimous consensus was achieved on such issues as the international community's continued security presence in the country, as well as the importance of conducting voter awareness campaigns before national elections.

Decentralisation versus Centralization

Key issues discussed over the consolidating of power in Afghanistan's center focused on the priority and timing of such consolidation, namely which options are most viable in the current circumstances. Some participants stated that Afghanistan will not be stable unless a central government is strengthened and prioritized. Other experts argued that decentralization is the only option that would ensure stability, given the existence of a number of influential stakeholders outside the central government.

Sub-national units: Is it necessary to redraw boundaries?

If new boundaries do need to be drawn, careful consideration must be given to the number and composition of sub-national units. On the one hand, participants stated that existing research reveals that greater numbers (up to 50) of sub-national units tend to stabilize ethnically and socially fragmented societies. On the other hand, participants expressed concern that 32 provinces are administratively difficult to manage, and units would benefit from consolidation.

Some experts suggested that 12-15 sub-national units would be most viable in the current context. Participants expressed wide agreement, though not consensus, that sub-national units, if redrawn, should not correspond solely to the country's ethnic composition. Doing so would tend to reinforce multiethnicity and enhance interethnic cooperation. The political culture of the district system could be designed to facilitate social alliances.

Institutions

Experts at the Liechtenstein Colloquium also considered what the most important considerations for the structure of government should be. Discussions centered on two general models of governance – majority representation, or proportional representation. Participants in favour of proportional representation argued that a majority system might lock out minorities and prompt dissatisfied stakeholders to subvert the formal system of government. A minority of participants felt that a majority-based system would facilitate social alliances in the local political arena.

Some experts supported a Swiss-style rotating head of state. Most, however, felt a rotating executive would both undermine consensus-building and render it difficult to institutionalize the regular transfer of power, such as occurs in the democratic election of a head of state.

Several participants emphasized the need to consider the role of traditional/religious leadership in the design of domestic political institutions. Several experts also urged the consideration and development of a strategy, vis-à-vis armed groups: in particular, some participants suggested a demilitarization program.

How Quickly Should Political Parties Be Formulated?

Participants disagreed, however, on the possibility for effective political parties to be created in time for Afghanistan's 2004 elections. Those experts stressing the need to establish parties immediately argued that parties could enhance both discipline and participation, thereby avoiding the personalization of politics. Those participants opposing the premature creation of parties argued that personalization is only potentially destabilizing in the absence of institutional constraints. Personalization of politics within functioning institutions however, can even be beneficial. These experts felt that stable political parties would naturally evolve and that establishing weak parties now could jeopardize their long-term legitimacy.

Some participants suggested the June 2004 deadline leaves insufficient time to register and educate voters, train Afghans to run their own elections, and to guarantee security at the polls. Other experts emphasized that because no election is perfect, a postponement of elections could do more harm than good, insofar as the overall environment might not get better over time, and postponement may send the wrong signals.

The Role of the International Community

Certain potentially destabilizing issues such as the opium trade cannot be addressed without the assistance of powerful international actors such as the European Union. However, experts disagreed over the appropriate level of U.N. involvement. Some participants advocated a so-called “light footprint” approach, while other participants suggested the need for a greater interna-

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tional presence. The international community can play an instrumental role in minimizing any potentially destabilizing influence on or by Afghanistan’s neighbors, such as Pakistan and Iran.

Moreover, deliberations included what the nature of international and local community involvement should be. For example, experts agreed upon the need to strike a necessary balance between foreign recommendations and indigenous Afghan proposals. They also agreed that it is crucial that Afghans themselves assume full responsibility for their constitution’s design. The primary role of the international community, participants noted, should be a supportive one. Both international and local NGOs are conducting important humanitarian work, but all participants strongly agreed that non-governmental actors cannot be a substitute for coherent and legitimate state structures.

Ethnicity

Does ethnicity matter in Afghanistan? Experts agreed that a strong national Afghan identity exists. However, participants disagreed on the extent to which ethnicity plays a role defining Afghanistan’s political and social landscape. Experts did agree on the need to create institutions which bridge rather than reinforce ethnic cleavages. Participants also agreed that the constitution should be designed ensure the rights of minorities, women, and children.



Above, from left to right: HSH Hereditary Prince Alois of Liechtenstein, Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, director of the Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University, and Dr. Amin Farhang, Afghanistan’s Minister of Reconstruction. In the background is James Doig, professor of politics and international affairs at the Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University.

Security

On the role of the international community with regard to security, participants unanimously agreed on the need for a continued international security presence in Afghanistan, with a need for immediate expansion to the country’s provinces, several of which are dominated by local leaders. Experts agreed that a strong international security presence is critical in preparing for and conducting national and regional elections. Increased security is essential for political and economic progress in Afghanistan. It is therefore important that the constitutional provisions and the role of international actors not work at cross-purposes. Security should be provided at the time of the elections, but participants urged that general insecurity should not be used as an excuse to cancel elections.

Summary

Participants concluded that neither decentralization nor centralization has to be prioritized one over the other, as they are not mutually exclusive options. A mixed system of asymmetric powersharing may thus represent the best option.

Experts voiced concern that redrawing administrative boundaries at such a critical stage could have deleterious effects on stability. In addition, redrawing boundaries could undermine the existing capacity of local government to provide services.

All participants determined the necessity of a strong judiciary for implementation and legitimatization of any future constitution. Experts also agreed upon the need to build upon existing institutional capacity, especially those institutions which enjoy already popular recognition, and are still functioning.

The need to integrate gender considerations into governmental structure was also stressed. Some participants went on to suggest specific gender quotas, such as those featured in India's governmental system.

Participants emphasized the long-term importance of creating strong political parties in promoting discipline within institutions and reducing the importance of individual leaders; bridging ethnic/social differences; and encouraging political participation in the country more generally. Some participants also suggested enhancing incentives for diaspora to return.

The need to guarantee the security of the voting public before—and, more importantly, during—elections, even for the immediate election period was also determined to be an urgent need. Participants generally agreed that scheduling national elections before regional elections would facilitate the development of a broader national electorate, rather than cause regional or ethnically divided politics.

A fundamental question asked during the colloquium was what should be the level of involvement in Afghanistan by the international community? Participants agreed that continued multilateral international involvement and financial support is crucial to the reconstruction of Afghanistan, even after the elections.

United Nations and other international involvement are crucial to preventing further deterioration of both the national and regional security situations.

Future colloquia as part of this project will include, in 2003, a conference in Bonn on security, as well as a meeting on state-building in Kabul. In addition, there will be a meeting on the regional aspects of building a secure and viable Afghan state at the Australian National University in Canberra, and a EU-sponsored meeting in Brussels in 2004. A concluding meeting will be held at Princeton University's Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs in 2005.

The website for the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs:
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