



WILLIAM BYRD

E-mail: wbyrd@usip.org

Avoiding Meeting Fatigue

How to make the numerous international meetings on Afghanistan more effective

Summary

- The numerous high-profile international meetings on Afghanistan since 2001 have helped keep attention focused on Afghanistan, elicit financial support, give a “seat at the table” to all partners, generate good strategic documents, and provide a forum for the Afghan government.
- However, the meetings often have raised excessive expectations; lacked meaningful follow-up; undermined their own objectives; prioritized diplomacy over substance; focused more on donors’ issues than Afghan problems; oriented the Afghan government toward donors; diverted resources toward meetings; resulted in meeting fatigue; and sometimes seemingly substituted for action.
- These meetings can be made more effective by: (1) keeping to realistic expectations; (2) not expecting meetings to substitute for difficult decisions and actions; (3) having substantive, disciplined agendas and avoiding co-optation by diplomatic priorities; (4) matching objectives with the issue(s) the meeting is supposed to address; (5) ensuring quality background work; (6) focusing follow-up on key areas and a few simple, monitorable benchmarks; and (7) keeping the number and frequency of meetings manageable.

“No other conflict-affected country has been as “meeting-ized” as Afghanistan. . . . If high-profile meetings and high-quality documents alone could solve a country’s problems, the effort in Afghanistan already would have succeeded. . . .”

A Plethora of Meetings

Since the downfall of the Taliban regime in late 2001, Afghanistan has been subjected to a plethora of high-profile international meetings—at a minimum every two years, more often every year, and sometimes just months apart. With the Chicago NATO Summit on Afghanistan’s security in May, the “Heart of Asia” Ministerial Conference in Kabul in June, the Tokyo conference on development in July, and the possibility of follow-up meetings already being discussed, it might be useful to step back and review this experience. What has the sheer number of these meetings meant? What have they accomplished? In what ways have they fallen short? Have there been negative side effects? And how do such events relate to the ongoing transition as well as beyond 2014?

Some of the more high-profile meetings on Afghanistan include:

- Bonn Conference (Bonn Agreement concluded in December 2001) and related events;
- Tokyo Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan (January 2002);
- Geneva Meeting on Afghan Security Sector (May 2002);
- Berlin Conference (April 2004);

- London Meeting (February 2006);
- Paris Conference (June 2008);
- Kabul Conference (July 2010);
- Lisbon NATO Summit (November 2010);
- Bonn International Conference (December 2011);
- Chicago NATO Summit (May 2012);
- Tokyo Cooperation Conference (July 2012).

There have also been almost countless other lower profile but significant events, ranging from meetings on key sectors (e.g. justice, private sector) to policy-oriented intellectual interactions (e.g. a number of Wilton Park conferences), meetings in foreign capitals of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board for Afghanistan (an Afghan government ministerial/donor ambassador-level forum which normally meets in Kabul), numerous regional cooperation conferences, and many others. It seems that no other conflict-affected country has been as “meeting-ized” as Afghanistan.

Accomplishments

Taken as a whole, these meetings have been successful in some respects:

Keeping international attention focused on Afghanistan (especially important in the earlier years). While the number of high-profile meetings in part reflected the importance of Afghanistan, they have also contributed to keeping the country in the international eye. Less important during the recent “surge” years, this role of high-profile meetings may again become more significant with the risk of Afghanistan falling out of the spotlight in coming years.

Perhaps (particularly in the earlier years) eliciting more financial resources for Afghanistan. Over the past decade Afghanistan has not exhibited the usual tendency in post-conflict situations for attention and aid to decline precipitously after a few years of engagement. However, the role of high-profile meetings in this regard should not be overstated, compared with Afghanistan’s geopolitical importance, the expanding insurgency and deteriorating security trends in the latter part of the decade which elicited more troops and aid in response, and probably most important the presence of large numbers of international troops which has been accompanied by high aid levels.

Demonstrating the inclusive, multinational nature of the international intervention in Afghanistan and providing a “place at the table” for all partners. Although the USA all along has been the dominant troop provider and largest single aid donor, the intervention in Afghanistan was from the beginning internationalized (U.N. Security Council mandate, NATO engagement), which was concretely demonstrated by the high-profile meetings. Having a “seat at the table” may have encouraged smaller countries to participate and contribute to a greater extent than would otherwise have been the case.

Serving as the vehicle for production of good documents on Afghanistan. Several meetings had associated high-quality and influential strategic documents and related analytical work—including, among others, “Securing Afghanistan’s Future” (2004) and “Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014” (2011). Indeed, if high-profile meetings and high-quality documents alone could solve a country’s problems, the effort in Afghanistan already would have succeeded. . .

Providing a forum for the Afghan government to present its strategy and concerns. Notable examples include the Berlin conference of 2004 (at which “Securing Afghanistan’s Future” comprised the government’s presentation) and the Paris conference of 2008 (where the “Afghanistan National Development Strategy” was formally presented).

Shortcomings and Adverse Side Effects

Set against these positives are a number of shortcomings and adverse side effects:

Raising unrealistically high expectations. Afghans were exposed to high aid pledges announced at meetings, while foreign partners were given the impression that Afghanistan could rapidly modernize and reform. Such expectations were unrealistic on both sides and inevitably were disappointed. Moreover, donors often inflated their pledges by recycling past pledges, resulting in double-counting of pledges across different meetings. This provided positive headlines, but when Afghans read about billions of dollars pledged and then saw little change in their own lives, they assumed the money had been diverted by corrupt international and national actors.

Lack of meaningful follow-up on agreements reached and commitments made at meetings. For example, the Afghanistan Compact of 2006, with its very large number of highly ambitious benchmarks, became virtually meaningless within about a year. More often than not, follow-up to meetings was overtaken by events and lost in the run-up to subsequent meetings—the sheer number of such events detracting from the follow-up for each individual meeting. The large and growing amounts of funding for Afghanistan also hindered follow-up to hold the Afghan government accountable for its commitments.

Not achieving meetings' own objectives, sometimes even setting them up to fail. For instance, one of the objectives of the development-oriented meetings was to mobilize aid for Afghanistan. Yet too often this aspect has been deliberately downplayed (most recently in the case of the upcoming Tokyo conference), with meetings explicitly billed as not being “pledging conferences” to avoid embarrassment to some donors or hosts, undermining resource mobilization.

Diplomacy often tending to trump substance. While diplomacy was necessary for organizing meetings, much effort went into ensuring a good diplomatic outcome of meetings, particularly for the host country. No meeting—no matter how far it fell short of its objectives—was openly acknowledged to be a failure or even an incomplete success. Perhaps this reflected in part the fragility of the international coalition supporting Afghanistan and the need for positive diplomacy to help maintain troop levels from countries where public opinion was not sympathetic to such deployments. But the relentless onslaught of good news from conference communiqués damaged the credibility of the meetings, as well as obscuring their substantive achievements.

Meetings often focused on donors' needs and issues rather than addressing Afghanistan's problems. This detracted from substantive problem-solving. Moreover, the large number of participants with their own favorite causes made it that much more difficult to establish priorities. A quintessential example of the damage caused by catering to donors' rather than Afghanistan's needs was the May 2002 Geneva meeting, at which “lead donor” responsibilities for different parts of the Afghan security sector were allocated by the international community among several donor countries. These assignments reflected political and diplomatic priorities among donors including the desire of some of them for visibility, rather than Afghanistan's requirements. For the most part, the division of labor (USA responsible for the Afghan army, Germany for the police, Italy for the justice system, Japan for disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, and the UK for counternarcotics) had little if any alignment with differing comparative advantages and resources of the designated lead donors. The resulting balkanization of the security sector and of international support for it had harmful consequences which were felt for a number of years, and delayed and distorted critical aspects of security sector reform such as development of the justice sector and police.

Orienting the Afghan government toward donors rather than the Afghan population. Highly aid dependent countries like Afghanistan face the problem of “dual accountability”—i.e., accountability to their external financiers detracting from domestic financial and political accountability,

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

William Byrd is a development economist and has worked on Afghanistan in various capacities over the past decade. During 2002–2006, he was stationed in Kabul, Afghanistan, where he served as the World Bank's country manager for Afghanistan and then as economic adviser. He is currently a visiting senior expert at the U.S. Institute of Peace. He participated in and was involved in the preparations for many of the high-profile international meetings on Afghanistan over the past 10-plus years. This paper is based on his experience with such meetings and reflects his concerns about their shortcomings and the excessive expectations typically associated with them.

and the meetings may have exacerbated this problem by forcing the government to face the international community so frequently. However, as indicated earlier the lack of follow-up meant there was not meaningful accountability to the donor community either, so both domestic and international accountability were diffused and undermined.

Diversion of resources (especially intellectual resources) toward meetings rather than substance. While the funds required were not negligible, including for transporting large delegations around the world and accommodating them at high-cost locations, the human and intellectual resources loom large in the meetings' costs. Much intellectual, organizational, and logistical effort went into these meetings, and the opportunity cost of these resources may have been very high.

Meeting fatigue—too many meetings detracting from the significance of each individual event. This has been especially true in recent years when the number of high-profile meetings multiplied.

Meetings often seemingly substituting for action. The focus on meetings and on achieving positive outcomes for the meetings themselves may well have distracted from the hard work of making difficult decisions and implementing them. Nor could the meetings and documents presented at them do more than paper over the lack of a coherent overall strategy interlinking security, political, economic, and governance dimensions. Unfortunately, it appears that high-profile meetings often were at least implicitly seen as a top priority in their own right, and seemingly became almost a substitute for action. Indeed, as the situation deteriorated in the second half of the last decade, at times it seemed as if the main response of the international community (prior to the 2009 surge) was to hold more meetings.

Lessons for the Future

Despite all these problems, not having high-profile international meetings on Afghanistan is not an option and most likely will not be an option in the future—pressures for holding them are enormous, and any reduction in their number most likely would have been possible only at the margins. Moreover, with declining international attention and resources for Afghanistan, the benefits of meetings in keeping Afghanistan on international policy agendas may again come to the fore.

So the best approach is to try to make meetings more effective. Declining international resources for Afghanistan in coming years may facilitate such efforts by making it easier to make agreements stick, provided that reductions in assistance are pre-programmed and gradual.

Some suggestions to increase the effectiveness of high-profile international meetings on Afghanistan include the following:

- Keep to realistic expectations about what meetings should try to accomplish;
- Do not expect meetings to substitute for difficult decisions and hard actions;
- Have substantive meeting agendas, try to avoid complete co-optation by diplomatic priorities, and try to maintain discipline in shaping the agenda (avoid proliferation of pet causes);
- Match meeting objectives with the main issue(s) the meeting is supposed to address;
- Ensure quality background work for meetings based on realism, presented in digestible form;
- Given the limitations to follow-up, focus on key areas and a few simple, monitorable benchmarks;
- Keep the number and frequency of meetings manageable.



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Washington, D.C. 20037

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