

POLICY NOTE ON AFGHANISTAN: ACHIEVEMENTS, OPPORTUNITIES, & CAVEATS

Overview: What Has Been Achieved in 13 Years

Afghanistan has been transformed physically, politically, and socially. The pool of human capital has been immensely expanded and deepened, especially among youth, many of whom make up a mass of aspiring and motivated citizens eager to make a positive difference. Even if the outcome of the 2014 presidential election was contentious, the core notion of democracy has grown, with citizens increasingly expressing their demands for participation and accountability. The status of women, while still uneven and subject to much debate, has changed profoundly. There is a pluralistic media and a level of political sophistication that would not have been imaginable 13 years ago. While challenges still abound and Afghanistan remains a country at risk, unfortunately the narrative of failure has drowned out some of the successes; the troubles of the Kabul Bank make headlines, but the very favorable scores on the Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability assessment do not. Perhaps most impressive, what has been achieved has been achieved despite on-going conflict.

Opportunities

- A new government with a reformist outlook which recognizes the importance of building less corrupt and more sustainable institutions, generating revenue streams from new economic activity, engaging with the West on security and other matters, and having the President visibly playing the role of commander-in-chief of the military.
- Domestic pressure for reform articulated through the media, civil society groups, and private-sector professional associations.
- Recognition among Afghanistan's political leaders that some level of de-concentration of government functions and decision-making to bodies outside of Kabul is needed.
- Reduction in excessive international funding, which can allow support to be calibrated at a sensible but predictable level, putting the brakes on excessive ambition as well as reducing problematic parallel structures.
- Indications of a possible new, more helpful approach by Pakistan towards allowing a stable Afghanistan, encouraged by President Ghani's reaching out and reinforced by China's interests in regional stability and in helping to establish a peace process.

Recommendations

- Commit to long-term, predictable support at reasonable levels. Financial, military, and development support can create a level of confidence in the future, encourage domestic and foreign private investment, and reinforce and sustain gains that have been made. This starts but does not end with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). We should build on our investments in the very real social and economic transformation that has taken place, while insisting on improved monitoring, evaluation, and accountability, and recognizing that some of the long-term sustainment needs are a consequence of systems that we put into place ourselves.
- Invest in and support Afghan civil society and higher education. To complement support for critical government institutions, we should continue our support to Afghan civil society. Over

the next decade, control of Afghan politics will likely pass from the hands of traditional powerbrokers to those with a very different and far more constructive world view. We should recognize the sweeping changes that are taking place, and invest in Afghanistan's younger generation. A longer-term commitment will also help to sustain the gains made by women and girls.

- Support the Afghan government in negotiations with the Taliban. If the new government continues to pursue negotiations that are backed by significant segments of the population, stay within articulated red lines, and are consistent with our national interests, we should not undermine these politically or militarily, as we have done in the past. We should keep in mind that the negotiation process will be long and extremely fragile.
- Be clear, pragmatic, and skillful in managing our relations with Afghanistan's regional neighbors. Since 2001, we have at times been able to work discretely with Iran and Pakistan, but we have also been vulnerable to being misled by them and to occasionally not considering regional impacts of bilateral diplomacy.
- Build on US domestic support for Afghanistan. Public support for a continuation of major military operations in Afghanistan has waned over the past five years (in part due to the dominant narrative of failure), but this does not imply opposition to more modest long-term programs of security and development assistance and diplomatic engagement. If provided with the strategic rationale for a stable and politically moderate Afghanistan, the American public will endorse policies supportive of that objective, provided that the costs are not deemed excessive. Support would be especially forthcoming for keeping Afghanistan from again becoming a safe haven for international terrorism, sustaining the gains of Afghan women and girls, and not destabilizing nuclear-armed Pakistan.
- Improve our analytical and decision-making processes. We should more carefully consider the political context and operating incentives in order to ensure that our military and development resources are not wasted or else have unintended negative consequences.
- Promote accountability systems that encourage institutional learning and improvement rather than attempting to catch out and punish. Under the current system, incentives are to highlight and exaggerate success and hide or minimize failure, which reduces opportunities to improve.
- Capitalize on and enhance the effectiveness of our own accumulated human and political capital. Unlike in 2001, the US now has an extensive pool of people who have spent years in Afghanistan and who have a good understanding of its politics, economy, security forces, and society. They can help formulate and implement an effective Afghanistan policy, but will need professional incentives to serve in that country as America's security priorities shift elsewhere. Tours of duty for senior- and mid-level management should be extended from one to two-three years, and personnel assigned to Afghanistan must be given the wherewithal to engage with the population beyond fortified embassy and military compound walls.

- Establish a bi-partisan Congressional Caucus for Afghanistan. A group comprised of those members who believe in sustained long-term US and international support to that country, contingent upon improvements in government performance and accountability, can play a positive role in mobilizing resources and ensuring that our policies are effective.

Concerns and Caveats

- Throughout history, Afghan governments have fallen when external support has been withdrawn. In large part due to the international community's sharp reduction in aid over the last two years, the Afghan state's resources are low, even to the point where it may struggle to pay salaries. Similar to the 1990s post-Soviet period, collapse of the Afghan state would have very negative regional and international consequences.
- The National Unity Government will need to function at a pace that is more consistent with citizen expectations and a possibly rapidly unfolding regional political situation. Economic progress, including immediately in the trade sector as well as longer-term in the promising extractives sector, requires that steps be taken to improve governance. Progress to date in forming a cabinet and articulating programs is widely viewed as inadequate and must be accelerated.
- Reforming state institutions and reducing endemic corruption will be a long-term and challenging process which is more likely to be successful if we adopt longer-term horizons and funding commitments rather than a series of one year projects which often result in actions which are merely symbolic.
- The Afghan state's failure to deliver on governance and become a more responsive state may fuel insurgency as well as "soft extremist groups" working through educational and other institutions.
- US politics and inter-institutional rivalries can degrade clear thinking about what makes strategic best sense for the US, including reconciliation with the Taliban and levels and types of support to Afghanistan. From the start of the intervention, shortcomings, including the late start on building the ANSF in earnest, have resulted from the lack of agreement on objectives, poor coordination among our own institutions, and the lack of an overarching strategy.