

RESEARCH ARTICLE

An Uncertain Future for Afghanistan's Security Sector

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Western powers may have espoused accountability, civil society, and good governance, but their Afghan operations have largely emphasized training and equipping for security. Military capacities are higher now but those forces are not necessarily balanced, well-managed, or sustainable. A paramilitarized police has alienated communities. Ministries of Defense and Interior are imperiled by lacks in planning, civilian oversight, and budget sufficiency. To stabilize gains of the last decade, donors need to renew their commitments to major (but more discerning) assistance.

Introduction

After signing a unity deal with his bitter electoral rival Abdullah Abdullah, Afghan President-elect Ashraf Ghani hailed the country's first democratic transfer of power as 'a big victory for the nation' (BBC 2014a). The power sharing deal signed in late September 2014 followed months of turmoil over an election marred by 'systematic fraud' (Gall 2014). While the months long political drama in Kabul was a cause of deep concern for Afghans and donors alike, polarizing the country and costing the economy US\$5 billion, it also distracted attention from a major upsurge in Taliban military activity with which the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) struggled to cope (BBC 2014b). The sense of renewed public confidence in the ANSF, attained by the relatively smooth manner in which they had assumed security responsibility from withdrawing NATO forces in 2012 and 2013, had begun to fray. Contrary to repeated NATO affirmations of the robust capability of the Afghan forces,

they looked increasingly vulnerable in the early autumn of 2014, facing an enemy that was no longer content with hit and run attacks. The Taliban was now choosing to stand and fight in order to contest and even hold territory. Lacking the ability to call in NATO air and ground assets at the first sign of trouble, the ANSF experienced significant setbacks that once again raised serious doubts regarding the future of Afghanistan's democratic transition.

The mounting challenges encountered by the ANSF in securing the country and warding off a seemingly rejuvenated, even if somewhat divided (Giustozzi 2014), Taliban movement, demonstrates the premature nature of the international withdrawal that has left the security sector reform (SSR) project incomplete.¹ Even if NATO lives up to promises to maintain significant levels of aid and support to the ANSF in the years ahead—which is questionable with few boots on the ground, security deteriorating and competing international priorities mounting—the Afghan security forces will still struggle to stand on their own feet and overcome their dependency on foreign forces. While the

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ANSF may be 'very good fighters' as General Martin Dempsey, US Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in August 2014, their management systems, supporting structures, and strategic culture, among other pillars of the security architecture, remain weak and underdeveloped (Michaels 2014). As former Afghan Defense Minister Rahim Wardak stated in early October 2014, the Afghan army 'is still a child. It is not even a teenager' (Straziuso 2014). If the Afghan security forces falter in the years ahead, it can be argued that it will not just represent a failure of the ANSF to stand up to anti-government armed groups like the Taliban, but also a failure of donors and Afghan stakeholders to build a legitimate and sustainable security sector,² sufficiently resilient to overcome existing and foreseeable challenges. The situation in Iraq illustrates the perverse effect of both premature international withdrawal after military intervention and the consequences of incomplete SSR. While the Afghanistan engagement is undoubtedly a unique case and its story is still being written, similar unintended consequences could be in store, especially if the NATO withdrawal leads to a full-scale abandonment of Afghanistan as we saw in the early 1990s after the Afghan-Soviet war. The inauguration of a reformist President in Kabul determined to tackle corruption and poor governance gives some cause for optimism, but the future of the Afghan security sector, like the rest of the Afghan state, remains uncertain. This paper will probe that uncertainty, examining the state of the Afghan security sector and the policies, plans and programs that have and will shape it over the coming decade and beyond.

The Centerpiece of the Statebuilding Agenda

The development of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) was always treated as the centerpiece of Afghanistan's security sector reform (SSR) and statebuilding agendas. This emphasis on frontline security forces accentuated with time as the security

environment deteriorated and the Taliban-led insurgency gained traction. Rapid development of Afghan security institutions was a critical element of NATO counter-insurgency strategy, which required boots on the ground to help foreign troops clear, hold and build territory. It also created the minimum enabling conditions for NATO states to start drawing down their forces. Accordingly, the SSR process in Afghanistan was endowed with a singular focus, the training and equipping of security forces for a combat role. Fundamental SSR goals³ such as reforming justice and corrections bodies, raising awareness of human rights norms, developing oversight and accountability mechanisms, fostering civil society engagement, and embedding good governance principles were publicly touted as priorities by donors, but in practice were treated as luxuries not afforded by the prevailing security and political environment. It was indeed a Cold War-style train and equip program driven by geostrategic imperatives rather than considerations of community safety, local access to justice, or institutional sustainability. One need only look at the funding picture to see how ANSF development dominated the aid landscape. Of the US\$109 billion dollars that the U.S. contributed to the reconstruction of Afghanistan—a figure surpassing the Marshall Plan aid program for Europe in the aftermath of World War Two—more than half, roughly US\$62 billion, was spent on the Afghan military alone (Pillalamarri 2014). When you include monies allocated to other parts of the ANSF—the police, intelligence services and counter-narcotics forces—as well as the contributions made by other donors, the number balloons further.

The bulk of ANSF funding was provided over the past five years (2009–2014), as the U.S. tried to paper over earlier funding gaps and programming delays. While the massive money flows certainly gave the process a shot in the arm, it also fostered corruption and mismanagement and failed to correct many of the basic problems afflicting the

security institutions. In a 2013 report, John F. Sopko, the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), described a 'rush to spend' money to build up the military through programs that were marred by 'poor planning, poor recordkeeping, poor oversight and poor security' (Craig 2013). A U.S. Joint Center for Operational Analysis (JCOA) report similarly concluded that 'the deluge of military and aid spending which overwhelmed the absorptive capacity of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIROA) created an environment that fostered corruption' (JCOA 2014: 1).

A sense of confidence and optimism surrounded the ANSF at the beginning of 2014. The process to transition security responsibility for the country from NATO to the Afghan government had run its course without major setbacks. The transition or *inteqal*,⁴ was undertaken in five tranches, beginning in 2011 with stable districts in the country's central region and ending in 2013 with areas in the volatile south and east. The ANSF grew significantly during this period from roughly 224,000 personnel in May 2010 to an estimated 345,000 by January 2014. The competent manner in which the ANSF assumed control of security responsibilities from withdrawing coalition troops initially buoyed Afghan and donor confidence. Another boost to the morale of the Afghan security sector and its donor patrons came with the April 2014 Presidential election. The Afghan security forces were widely lauded in the local and international press for thwarting major Taliban attacks on the polls, which were described as largely peaceful.

The positive sentiments spawned by these developments concealed deep dysfunctionality within the security establishment, which would come to the fore as the year wore on. Confirming the worst fears of policy-makers and observers of Afghanistan, the gradual withdrawal of international forces sparked an upsurge in Taliban military activity. This did not just involve a rise in the number of security incidents, but also a notable shift in

strategy and tactics. Taliban forces gradually diversified their strategy, no longer limiting themselves to asymmetric insurgent tactics, exemplified by roadside bombings and suicide attacks. They started to engage in conventional military attacks. The withdrawal of U.S. and NATO air assets, which previously deterred the Taliban from massing forces, has been one driver of this shift in approach. For instance, in August 2014, an estimated 700 heavily armed Taliban insurgents battled the ANSF for control of key districts in the province of Logar, located an hour's drive south of the Afghan capital Kabul. The Taliban had dug-in for a long fight in Logar, which controls a key transit corridor into the capital region, even bringing with them 'makeshift mobile (health) clinics' (Reuters 2014a). The Logar operation was a part of an intensive Taliban campaign of violence in the summer of 2014 that focused less on disrupting Afghan government and NATO activities as in the past, and more on gaining and holding strategic assets, such as highways and border crossings.

In September 2014, the Taliban launched 788 attacks in Helmand province alone over a three-month period, killing 230 Afghan police and military personnel. The Taliban threatened to take control of the key districts of Musa Qala and Sangin, which UK and US forces fought hard to pacify in recent years at the cost of 150 casualties (Nordland and Shah 2014). A member of parliament from Helmand, Nimatullah Ghafari, tried to sound the alarm of an impending defeat in his home province: 'The collapse of Helmand will have its impact on many provinces, such as Nimroz, Farah, Ghor and even Kandahar province, and that would be expensive for the government' (Arash 2014). With similar Taliban activity observed in Ghazni, Kapisa, Nangarhar, and Wardak provinces in August and September 2014, the dire warning was all the more justified.

More than 100 Afghan soldiers and police died on a weekly basis in the summer of 2014, prompting the Afghan Defense and Interior Ministries to cease releasing casualty data.

The UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) reported a 24 per cent rise in civilian casualties for the first half of 2014 as compared to the same period during the previous year, the highest numbers recorded since UNAMA first began tracking casualty data in 2009. Importantly, for the first time the majority of those casualties came from ground fighting between the ANSF and the Taliban rather than roadside bombs (Ahmed 2014).

When it comes to the April 2014 Presidential election, which was immediately and widely hailed as a triumph for the ANSF, it has since become clear that the security environment was much worse than first thought, a result of underreporting of security incidents in rural areas by both international journalists, largely congregated in Kabul (Aikins and Gopal 2014), and Afghan journalists, out of a feeling of 'national duty' (Ahmed and Zahori 2014). Indeed statistics released several days after the poll showed that contrary to initial reports about the calmness of the election, it was in fact an alarmingly violent day (Partlow 2014). Moreover, the reported high turnout for the polls, which seemed to substantiate the narrative of a security success story, was later shown to be a product of massive electoral fraud that would throw the country into political crisis (Gall 2014).

Beyond the rosy NATO assessments and mixed press reporting, it has become increasingly clear that the Afghan security forces are still far from stable, effective and sustainable. Developments in 2014 have shown that SSR in Afghanistan is a work in progress. A closer look at the specific challenges of the army and police demonstrate this reality and the urgent need for high levels of donor attention and support.

The Army

The Afghan National Army (ANA) has long been viewed as one of the success stories of Afghanistan's state-building process, especially when juxtaposed against the record of its counterpart, the Afghan National Police (ANP). Numbering just over 186,000 troops

in February 2014, the ANA has achieved some operational success and according to most public opinion polls⁵ is viewed positively by the Afghan population. The ANA has not suffered from the endemic corruption and factionalism that has afflicted the police. Following the transition of security responsibility to the Afghan government, the ANA has undertaken a number of successful operations. For instance, in December 2013 the ANA spearheaded one of the largest operations undertaken by the ANSF to date, covering four provinces (Kandahar, Daykundi, Uruzgan, and Zabul). The operation killed more than 50 insurgents and resulted in the clearing of key districts, and the capturing of scores of weapons caches, IEDs, and suicide vests (Beyersdofer 2014).

There is little doubt that the tactical and strategic capacity of the ANA has improved significantly over the past five years. However, weighty problems persist, the most notable of which is the ANA's attrition rate, which stood at a startling 33 per cent at the beginning of 2014 (Pugliese 2014). Almost 60,000 ANA troops are leaving the service each year, a major threat to the viability of the army. On top of this, as much as 50 per cent of the ANA are estimated to be using drugs (Pugliese 2014) and less than half the force can be categorized as literate (despite the investment of over US\$200 million in literacy programming since 2009) (Ratnam 2014). These are not new problems, having persisted since the early days of the ANA development process despite strenuous efforts to address them. ANA troops are also killing more civilians than ever before – 956 in 2013, up 59 per cent from the previous year – an outgrowth of their expanded security role, but a potentially worrying development that could, as time passes, undercut the burgeoning public trust in the force (Ehsan 2014).

There is a major imbalance in the ANA between frontline combat forces and supporting structures, like logistics, transportation and medical services. A January 2014 Pentagon report identified 'critical

high-end capability gaps' in the ANA that would encumber its ability to operate without NATO support (U.S. DoD 2014). The overarching focus of coalition countries on building the combat capacities of the ANA to get them into the insurgency fight, set back efforts to build a self-sufficient force. Even in early 2014, the ANA was heavily dependent on NATO for basic functions like airlift and medical support (Shanker 2013). While the U.S. has provided an impressive array of military resources to the ANA—including 160 different aircraft, 100,000 military vehicles, and 500,000 weapons (Karkar 2014)—significant gaps remain. As the ICG stated in a May 2014 report, 'with or without backup from international forces, the Afghan government will need more helicopters, armored vehicles, and logistical support' from donors for some time to come (ICG 2014: ii). The Afghan air force, while developing, is still inadequate to provide the air support required for the ANA to operate effectively across Afghanistan's vast and rugged territory (Agence France-Presse 2014a).

Two aspects of the ANA vividly illustrate the fundamental problems that the force faces: weapons management and medical services. A July 2014 report by SIGAR painted an alarming picture of ANA mismanagement of military resources donated by the United States and other NATO partners. Of the 474,823 weapons, primarily small arms,⁶ that the U.S. Department of Defense had provided to the ANA since 2004, 43 per cent (203,888 weapons) could not be accounted for (SIGAR 2014). The report concluded that there was a 'real potential for these weapons to fall into the hands of insurgents, which will pose additional risks to U.S. personnel, the ANSF, and Afghan civilians' (SIGAR 2014: 12). In fact, there have been numerous reports dating back to the early days of the SSR process that donated weapons were being sold to the Taliban and other anti-government armed groups (Bhatia and Sedra 2007).

A spring 2014 Pentagon report found that the Afghan security forces were unable

to provide adequate medical care for their wounded (Howell 2014). The ANA has struggled with shortages of medical personnel, equipment and transportation resources. In June 2013, the ANA had only 632 doctors for its 186,000 personnel, 72 short of its stated goal and well below actual needs in a wartime environment (Hall 2013). Wounded Afghans could previously rely on NATO to fill in the gaps in the ANA medical system, but as the NATO drawdown continues this luxury will no longer be afforded to them. The difficulty encountered in building ANA medical capacity is typified by the story of Dawood National Military Hospital in Kabul, which has received millions of dollars in U.S. aid, but has been 'plagued by graphic accounts of abuse,' referred to in U.S. Congressional hearings in 2012 as 'Auschwitz-like' (Chakraborty 2014). Making matters worse, the U.S. two-star army general responsible for the redevelopment of the facility has been accused of obstructing an investigation into patient abuse and fraud at the hospital (Chakraborty 2014).

Few observers question the desire of the ANA to fight. Indeed, as former Afghan Defense Minister and current Presidential advisor Rahim Wardak recently stated: 'The Afghan Army will fight. I mean that's in their blood to fight. But they don't have any air support of the ground forces...If the level of the threat increases the way it's increasing right now ... it will be a difficult task unless the U.S. continues to provide additional firepower' (Straziuso 2014). With U.S. and other donor assistance set to decline further in the coming years, the Afghan military will face an increasingly uphill battle, not only to fulfill its mandate, but to remain viable as an institution.

The Police

The Afghan National Police (ANP) is widely considered the basket case of the SSR process, a force rife with corruption, criminality and factionalism. A significant number of ANP units are believed to be engaged in different facets of the drug trade; more than

50 per cent are illiterate; and over the past two years many have defected to the Taliban, including a whole police unit in July 2012 (BBC 2012). There were 150,688 ANP on the payroll in early 2014, but it is believed that a significant number of those were 'ghost police' (Arkin 2014), a phenomenon in which police commanders falsify rank-and-file police personnel records in order to defraud the government of salary payments. The U.S. Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A), the U.S. military body responsible for supporting the ANSF development process, was forced to reconcile 54,000 erroneous identification numbers in the database used to manage ANP payroll (Conger 2014). It is believed that up to US\$200 million of assistance from the UNDP-managed Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan (LOTFA) could have been lost to fraud, corruption and mismanagement in the Ministry of Interior (Lynch 2014). The European Union have considered suspending funds to LOTFA, which pays the bulk of the police salaries, due to such irregularities (Conger 2014). An August 2014 report of the U.S. Department of Defense's Inspector General found that more than 4,500 payroll payments to Ministry of Interior employees totaling US\$40 million were 'potentially improper.' Moreover, the Ministry was responsible for millions of dollars of unauthorized salary deductions (Lynch 2014) and ineligible expenditures, including land purchases and allowances paid to uniformed employees (U.S. DDIG 2014). U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko summarized the problem succinctly in a February 2014 open letter to the leadership of the U.S. military mission in Afghanistan: 'The U.S. may be unwittingly helping to pay the salaries of non-existent members of the Afghan National Police' (Sopko 2014). The situation, as Sopko explained in another letter to UNDP chief Helen Clark, was facilitated by 'insufficient oversight and controls' on the part of both UNDP and the Afghan Ministry of Interior (Lynch 2014).

Petty corruption in the police has reached endemic levels. From roadblocks erected to skim money from motorists to the sale of duty weapons to anti-government forces, police corruption has helped to undercut the legitimacy of the state. In its annual survey on *Afghan Perceptions and Experiences of Corruption*, Integrity Watch Afghanistan found that Afghans viewed the judiciary and the police as the most corrupt institutions in the country (Isaqzadeh and Kabuli 2014: 4). The deputy governor of Ghazni province admitted in December 2013, that the police in his province were selling large amounts of their equipment to the Taliban: 'It isn't just bullets and military equipment that are being handed to our opponents in some districts, but also assorted vehicles including cars, generators and solar [panel] systems that are going to the Taliban' (Alizada 2013).

The police continue to suffer more casualties than any other security sector actor and twice as many as the ANA. On September 16, 2014 the Afghan Interior Minister testified to Parliament that the previous six months had been the deadliest on record for the police in the 13-year conflict, with 1,368 Afghan police officers killed and 2,370 wounded. The Taliban had carried out 700 attacks against the police during that period (Nordland 2014a). In light of these casualty figures it is not surprising that the attrition rate for the ANP has consistently been excessively high, standing at 15.9 per cent in early 2014 (Pugliese 2014).

One of the fundamental problems with the ANP is that it has been built to fight a war rather than serve in a community-policing role. Michelle Hughes aptly notes that 'the development of policing has focused mainly on recruiting, training, and equipping a force of police 'soldiers' who could perform basic security functions in partnership with the ANA' (Hughes 2014: 5). She goes on to say that 'any effort to further professionalize the force is seen as a distraction' by NATO (Hughes 2014: 3). The 'paramilitarization' of the police has alienated it

from communities and hamstrung its ability to provide core-policing functions at the grass roots level (Friesendorf 2011). The short-term benefits of police 'paramilitarization' to bolster NATO counter-insurgency operations, will be outweighed over the middle to long-term by the costs of a police force ill-equipped to engage communities and uphold the rule of law.

Beyond the regular police units— the Afghan Uniformed Police, Afghan Civil Order Police (responsible for special operations) and Afghan Border Police—the Ministry of Interior also commands an irregular police force, the Afghan Local Police (ALP). Numbering 26,451 in June 2014, the ALP comprises groups of locally-recruited militiamen provided with rudimentary training by U.S. Special Forces (Aikins 2014). Formed in 2010 under the authority of the Ministry of Interior, the ALP has been the subject of significant criticism inside and outside Afghanistan due to the perception that it provides an umbrella of legitimacy for illegal armed groups and 'that its short-term gains in territory will come at the expense of future stability, as armed groups proliferate outside of the state's control' (Aikins 2014). ALP militias have been accused of a litany of human rights abuses including murder, rape, arbitrary detention, abductions and forcible land grabs (HRW 2011). In August 2014, ten ALP in Kunduz joined the Taliban, part of a string of defections in its ranks (Sahil 2014). In spite of these problems, NATO has continued to view the ALP as an integral element of Afghanistan's security sector, a reflection of the expedient and short-termist outlook of security sector donors.

The ALP follows in the footsteps of a number of failed initiatives to mobilize informal security actors at the local level in order to fill security gaps, whether it is the Afghan Guard Force (AGF) or Afghan National Auxiliary Police (ANAP). The Ministry of Interior has stressed that the ALP is a temporary structure and will be scaled back and integrated into the uniformed police by 2018, although few

concrete details have been divulged on how this will be accomplished (Ratnam 2013).

The viability of the ANP, and particularly its transformation from a paramilitary force into a community police body, will require continued support from international donors. To date, that support has been 'ad hoc, disaggregated, and poorly defined' (Hughes 2014: 3). It is difficult to imagine that it will become more coherent as the donor military mission winds down, although it could push Afghan police leaders, who have grown more assertive in recent years, to secure greater control of the process.

The Missing Link: Security Sector Governance

Perhaps the defining feature of the Afghan security sector over the past decade is its ineffective, inefficient, politicized and unaccountable governance systems, an obvious dilemma that has nonetheless avoided donor priority lists. The overwhelming majority of donor aid and assistance to the Afghan security sector has been dedicated to front line security personnel, neglecting the Ministries that manage those forces, the Ministries of Defense (MoD) and Interior (MoI). A candid assessment of the two security ministries by the U.S. Centre for Naval Analysis, commissioned by the U.S. Congress and published in January 2014, revealed that the MoD and MoI 'face a considerable set of challenges, including inadequate long-range planning; a lack of staff development and training; poor logistics; a lack of a professional civil service; pervasive corruption; inadequate budget, accounting, and cost-control systems; and low levels of budget execution' (CNA 2014: 165). It is difficult to create effective security forces when the institutions mandated to manage them are in disarray,⁷ yet despite paying significant lip service to the goal of strengthening security sector governance, donors dedicated limited resources and energy to the task.

In general, governance and management structures in the principal security ministries

are weak and underdeveloped. While the Afghans are making gains in expanding the operational capacity of the ANA and ANP, they still lack a 'systematic and proactive planning method' (U.S. DoD 2013: 36). Compounding this problem for the MoI have been constant changes in leadership, which have hampered attempts to engage in long-term planning and budgeting (U.S. DoD 2013: 39). Its recent release of a *Ten-Year Vision for the Afghan National Police* is promising, but the Ministry of Interior still must demonstrate the political will and capacity to adhere to this ambitious vision (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2013).

Among the most striking examples of the governance dysfunction in the Afghan security sector is its financial management capacity. An August 2014 Pentagon report found that US\$1.5 billion in U.S. aid sent to the security sector between December 2012 and December 2013 could not be accounted for due in large part to the lack of competent oversight structures within the Afghan security institutions. The report warned that a further US\$13 billion worth of aid earmarked for Afghan security force development 'between FY2015 and FY2019 may be subject to wasteful spending and abuse' (U.S. DDIG 2014: 6).

With international military forces leaving and donor support gradually drying up, the governance demands placed on the line security Ministries will only increase. Over the past year, NATO has handed over 335 bases and facilities to the ANA, posing a significant maintenance challenge (Qatar News Agency 2014). Moreover the U.S. is still in the building stage of 291 other bases, outposts and hospitals for the Afghan military. The U.S. has spent in excess of US\$9.3 billion in constructing infrastructure for the ANA, including a 516,000-square-foot headquarters, referred to as the 'Afghan Pentagon' (Craig 2013). Both the ANA and ANP have a distinct lack of trained civilian administrators and bureaucrats, and instead rely predominantly on active service members to perform

these functions. As Hughes states 'when one walks into the MoI, the overall impression is of a military organization rather than a civilian bureaucracy' (Hughes 2014: 5). Modest donor programs to civilianize and professionalize the security sector bureaucracy have had a marginal impact.

An illustration of the lack of ministerial oversight of the security forces and its consequences came in 2014 with reports that several powerful police chiefs in the country had issued 'take no prisoners' orders to their personnel. For instance, the Police Chief of Kandahar Province, General Abdul Raziq issued such an order, which he justified with a reference to the corrupt justice system: 'I'm thankful for my forces for killing them all and not leaving their fates to the courts which simply demand a bribe [for their release]... The good news is that they [militants] will all be destroyed. My order to all my soldiers is not to leave any of them alive' (Bezhan 2014a). The rise in extra-judicial killings and abuse of prisoners, undertaken without sanction from the Ministry of Interior, illustrates a breakdown rather than strengthening of governance and command and control. Moreover, it illustrates the corrosive effects of an SSR process fixated on security force development at the expense of justice and governance structures.

The Sustainability Problem

There is no question that the current Afghan security sector is not sustainable on a financial basis, especially considering the recent downward trend of the Afghan economy. There is no shortage of statistics depicting Afghanistan's economic crisis, which has worsened due to the electoral deadlock. It has been estimated that Afghanistan lost US\$5–6 billion of economic activity during the protracted presidential electoral process (Hodge 2014). There has been, as William A. Byrd states, 'a hemorrhage of domestic revenue,' which, in the first half of 2014, was 21.5 per cent short of the half-year budget target (Byrd 2014). The World Bank has observed

a worrying decline in business confidence, with new firm registrations falling by 38 per cent between 2012 and 2013. Exports and imports have both declined in 2014, by 20 per cent and 26 per cent respectively (Harooni 2014). Other key economic indicators such as employment levels, domestic private investment and the value of the currency have also dropped considerably over the past two years (Qazi and Schaefer 2014). Increasing capital flight and the continued growth of the illicit narcotics industry also do not bode well for the stability of the Afghan economy.

The economic bubble created by the massive foreign intervention appears to be popping. The foreign military deployment was a major source of employment and driver of economic activity. The UN recently estimated in an unpublished report that 11.5 million Afghans, almost 40 per cent of the population, have lived within 5 km of a NATO military facility. The report also claimed that 'the livelihoods of nearly 90 per cent of Kabul's population of some 5 million were directly tied to 75 NATO military bases and Afghan military facilities' (Bezhan 2014b). With the number of bases in the country falling from 800 at the height of the military deployment in 2011 to a mere 80 in 2013, thousands of jobs and tens of millions of dollars in business contracts with Afghan firms have been lost. The housing market in the capital, another bellwether of the economy, dropped by 50 per cent from 2011 to 2014 (Bezhan 2014b). Considering that it was estimated in 2013 that 95 per cent of Afghanistan's annual GDP is derived from the international intervention (O'Donnell 2014), it is not surprising that economic growth has flat-lined, from a peak of 14 per cent in 2012 to around 3 per cent last year (O'Donnell 2014). While this does not take into account the black economy, the international military withdrawal has produced a stunning economic shockwave. This has meant that the Afghan government will see a budgetary shortfall of between US\$500 and US\$600 million this year, imperiling its ability to pay even a

modest share of the costs of its security sector (Donati 2014). The Afghan government was in such a dire situation in September 2014 that it had to request emergency funding of US\$537 million from donors just to meet its immediate payroll obligations (Nordland 2014b). While the international community has footed the bulk of the bill for Afghanistan's expanding security forces since 2001, the Afghan government's share of that burden was supposed to increase gradually, reaching US\$500 million next year, a target that now appears virtually impossible (Hodge 2014).

The U.S. estimates that the Afghan government is only capable of paying roughly 12 per cent of the annual cost of the ANSF, and this may be an overestimate (Sieff 2014). At current levels it will cost roughly US\$5–6 billion annually to field and equip the force (Pugliese 2014). When you consider that in 2013, the Afghan government collected roughly US\$1.7 billion in revenue, the problem is clear. In light of Afghanistan's falling domestic revenue, it will require massive foreign subsidies just to pay the salaries of the security forces. With the U.S. halving its development budget for Afghanistan in January 2014, and security assistance set to be reduced, the budgetary picture will become even tighter. With the scale of corruption and mismanagement in the Afghan government becoming more apparent, and with less than 20 per cent of Afghanistan expected to be accessible to U.S. oversight by the end of 2014, more reductions in funding are likely (Groll 2014).

At NATO's 2012 Summit in Chicago, the alliance pledged to support an ANSF of 228,500 personnel, with an estimated annual budget of US\$4.1 billion (NATO 2012), a significant drop from the current force ceiling of 352,000. Despite this fact, it remains unclear how and when these force reductions will be undertaken. With the security situation precarious, these cuts do not appear to be operationally feasible. Even the prospect of a reduced force strength has caused disquiet among ANSF leaders: 'If we lose 100,000

Afghan soldiers and police, we will have a very serious problem', a senior ANP official expressed (ICG 2014: 3). As the ICG states, 'the enormous size of the ANSF is neither indefinitely desirable nor sustainable,' but reducing the force will be no easy feat in the near to medium term, and if attempted could seriously destabilize the country (ICG 2014: 3).

According to Byrd (2014) 'turning the fiscal crisis around will take time, but a legitimate, credible new Afghan government coming into office is essential.' With the political climate uncertain, the economy faltering and donor commitments wavering, some say that Afghanistan's supposed, yet-to-be extracted treasure trove of natural resources, could save the country's economy. While the government has taken in an estimated US\$ 100 million per year from mining royalties, this projected windfall has yet to materialize, especially with local powerbrokers exploiting resources for their own benefit (O'Donnell 2014; Cho 2014). The economic picture in Afghanistan, once a source of great pride in Kabul with double-digit economic growth for several years, is looking increasingly bleak. This will spur a chain reaction across the state, placing the security sector in a very vulnerable position.

The Drawdown

In September 2014, the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) had roughly 41,000 troops in Afghanistan, 30,000 of which were American. With the formal military mission concluding at the end of 2014, that number will drop to 14,000–15,000, comprising 9,800 American and 4,000–5,000 European soldiers, mostly from Britain, Germany, Italy and Turkey. However, the withdrawal will not stop there, with the U.S. contingent set to drop to fewer than 1,000 soldiers in 2016, largely limited to staffing a security office in Kabul and advising the ANSF (Recknagel 2014). The Afghan government's signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement with the United States, which will remain in force until the end of 2024, will avoid a catastrophic full U.S.

departure from Afghanistan, but the current withdrawal plan will nonetheless seriously challenge efforts to consolidate the nascent ANSF, leaving them dangerously exposed.

While there are those who claim that the withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan will have a calming effect on the security environment, most indicators show the opposite to be true: that there is likely to be a spike in violence. We have already seen major increases in insecurity in the first three quarters of 2014. As discussed already, Taliban tactics have begun to shift in a worrying fashion. As the ICG states 'with less risk of attack from international forces, they are massing bigger groups of fighters and getting into an increasing number of face-to-face ground engagements with Afghan security personnel, some of which drag on for weeks' (ICG 2014: ii). Reduced NATO air support has changed the shape of the battle space as Fabrizio Foschini of the Afghanistan Analysts Network has noted: 'This allows a higher degree of freedom for insurgents to gather in big numbers of fighters without fear of being attacked by NATO warplanes' (Bezhan 2014a).

Considering that in 2013 the Taliban were, for the first time, able to inflict almost as many casualties on the ANSF as they suffered themselves (9,500 Taliban killed vs. 8,200 ANSF), this new approach seems to be bearing fruit. It counters the notion, promoted by many advocates of withdrawal, that the mere absence of foreign soldiers would make it harder for the Taliban to motivate their fighters. The downscaling of foreign troops has made the Taliban more ambitious rather than less. They have, as the ICG notes, already adjusted 'their rhetoric from calls to resist infidel occupation to a new emphasis on confronting the 'puppets' or 'betrayers of Islam' in the government' (ICG 2014: ii). Despite the entreaties of the Karzai administration, the Taliban showed little enthusiasm to renew peace talks that appeared largely moribund. They called the unity deal that ended the electoral crisis a 'sham' and vowed to continue fighting (Bezhan 2014c).

An October 2014 report of the ICG argued that signs of restraint by the Taliban during the second round of the Presidential election coupled with some alleged contacts between the Ashraf Ghani campaign and the Taliban, could point to some potential for political accommodation in the future (ICG 2014). With Taliban rhetoric and violence in the aftermath of the polls showing no sign of respite, it remains to be seen what significance the 'Taliban pause' during the elections will hold over the medium to long-term, but it is a sign of hope that a political settlement is at least conceivable (ICG 2014).

Paralleling the escalation of insurgent violence has been a rise in opium production, with poppy cultivation hitting a record high in 2013. Despite the investment of more than US\$7 billion in counter-narcotics efforts over the past twelve years, poppy cultivation grew 36 per cent in 2013 from the previous year as reported by the UNODC annual Opium Survey (UNODC 2013). Not only does the trade offer a steady supply of resources to anti-government groups like the Taliban, primarily through protection rackets and informal taxation, but with the decline in economic growth and government revenues it threatens to further consolidate Afghanistan as a nacro-mafia state.

The Political Problem

'The key to the Afghan forces next summer is political transition,' said US Marine General Joseph Dunford, the outgoing commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, in August 2014 (Michaels 2014). Dunford was making reference to the ongoing political turmoil surrounding the results of the controversial Presidential runoff vote between Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah that saw a UN audit dismiss hundreds of thousands of ballots as fraudulent (Agence France-Presse 2014b). The comment reflects a truism for state builders and security sector reformers alike: comprehensive institutional development and reform is impossible without a stable political environment and a consensus for change among key local

stakeholders, both within and outside the state. This can be summarized using the oft over-used term, political will. Even with the September 2014 agreement between the Ghani and Abdullah camps to form a unity government, the political environment in Afghanistan remains tense and uncertain, potentially limiting the political space and will for contentious reforms.

The unity deal, which accords the Presidency to Ghani, and a newly established chief executive position to Abdullah, each with significant power over appointments, avoids a major confrontation in the streets between the two camps, but the governance arrangement among the bitter rivals is unique and no guarantee of stability. The chief executive role is akin to a Prime Minister, and the agreement lays out the possibility of transitioning to a parliamentary system in the future, although that will require the ascent of a Constitutional Loya Jirga, which only Ghani can appoint. The agreement emphasizes that there will be 'parity' in senior positions in the government, particularly at the ministerial and cabinet level, with both sides being 'equally represented at the leadership level' (Behzan 2014c). Importantly, however, lower level appointments are to be made using a 'merit-based' mechanism, intended to circumvent a clienelist division of the bureaucracy that could stifle reform efforts (BBC 2014c).

Although both Presidential contenders praised each other in the wake of the deal, with Ghani calling on Afghans to 'leave the past behind and look forward to the future,' the rancor between the two camps may be difficult to contain in the new administration (RFE/RL 2014). The fear among many observers is that the government could fragment into competing power centers that would make the work of statebuilding next to impossible and undercut any efforts at reconciliation with the Taliban. The uncertain political outlook in Kabul, coupled with weakening NATO resolve at a time of shifting attentions to the new war against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, could complicate the task

of consolidating the nascent Afghan security sector. President Ghani's stated desire to jumpstart reforms across the state and meaningfully tackle corruption augurs well for the flagging statebuilding process, but his administration faces major political challenges that could stymie his agenda for change.

Conclusion

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was right when he stated in a July 30, 2014 op-ed directed at the Afghan people that 'the road to democracy is bumpy and the journey is not completed overnight' (Kerry 2014). It is for this reason that the drawdown of the NATO engagement in Afghanistan could prove devastating for the country. Despite many fits and starts, Afghanistan's statebuilding project can boast many significant accomplishments. In the security sector, as General Dunford has stated, the 'armed forces have matured [from scratch] into a force capable of defeating the Taliban on the battlefield' and enjoys the admiration and respect of most Afghans (Michaels 2014). However, the ANA like many other Afghan institutions faces significant hurdles that can be expected from a large and complex organization being built from the ground up during an active conflict. The ANA and the rest of the Afghan security sector still lie on a fragile foundation prone to reversal and collapse.

In light of the fiscal time bomb facing the ANSF and the escalating security pressures placed upon it, continued Western support for the foreseeable future will be indispensable. Dunford put it succinctly in September 2013: 'Afghanistan's police and army are losing too many men in battle, and may need up to five more years of western support before they can fight independently' (Graham-Harrison 2013). Any major disruption in security-related aid could lead to the breakdown of the security sector, and we are already seeing troubling signs of this. For instance, in November 2013, the U.S. congress halted the purchase of 15 Russian-made Mi-17 helicopters (worth US\$345 million)—crucial

to expand the limited airlift capacity of the Afghan military. NATO states have pledged to continue subsidizing the development of the Afghan security sector, albeit with a substantially reduced force ceiling, for up to a decade. However, as the international military commitment to Afghanistan draws down and the war vanishes from the consciousness of donor publics, we are likely to see more reductions in assistance and reversals of pledges. And there are precedents in modern Afghan history for the collapse of the security sector when external security assistance dries up. After all, the Najibullah regime lasted three years following the Soviet departure from Afghanistan, only collapsing when Soviet security subsidies were scaled back.

Afghanistan is entering a sensitive period of its transition. The school of thought that the NATO drawdown in Afghanistan will imbue the Afghans with greater urgency, boost the prospects for a peace deal with the Taliban, and reduce levels of insurgent violence do not appear to be supported by events in the ground. It is certainly true that, as Frances Z. Brown and Dipali Mukhopadhyay (2014) argue, 'the Western ability to orchestrate Afghan outcomes is already on the wane' and Afghans are engaging in ever more complex bargaining and negotiation over the future of the Afghan polity. However, international forces, even if less influential, still act as a crucial buffer between armed parties competing for political power and will play a indispensable mentoring and backstopping role for the ANSF. A change in the international approach in response to evolving security and political conditions on the ground is good policy. A modest reduction of assistance levels is also desirable. But the drastic precipitous reduction of troops and assistance that we are witnessing in Afghanistan imperils the transition and all of its achievements to date. David S. Sedney, a former Deputy Assistant of Defense, explained to *The New York Times* following the announcement of President Obama's Afghanistan withdrawal plan: 'The

consequences are not just that the Afghan forces are going to fight less well...They are going to take more casualties. They are going to commit more human rights abuses.' He concluded starkly that 'The president's language that this will bring the war to a responsible end is just wrong' (Gordon 2014).

The Afghans should be in the driver's seat for their statebuilding project, but the U.S. and its donor partners helped build the car, and have a responsibility to at least ensure that the engine is complete. The ICG aptly reminds donors that 'its patchy efforts over a dozen years to bring peace and stability must now be followed not with apathy, but with renewed commitment' (ICG 2014: 2). Average Afghans know the difficult climb their country faces in the aftermath of a NATO withdrawal. The 2014 Integrity Watch Afghanistan survey found that 'only 50 per cent of respondents... believed that the government would be able to ensure successful transition of power from international military forces' (IWA 2014). Optimism is often a scarce commodity in Afghanistan, and the NATO drawdown has made it even harder to find.

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Notes

¹ SSR is a specific model of security assistance, whose objective 'is to strengthen the ability of the sector as a whole and each of its individual parts to provide an accountable, equitable, effective, and rights respecting service' (UNDP 2003).

² The security sector can be defined as encompassing the security forces and the

relevant civilian bodies needed to manage them, the state institutions that have a formal mandate to ensure the safety of the state and its citizens against acts of violence and coercion, and the elected and duly appointed civil authorities responsible for control and oversight of these institutions (OECD 2007).

³ For a thorough overview of the central norms, principles and goals underlying the SSR model of security assistance, consult the OECD's (2007) *Handbook on Security Sector Reform: Supporting Security and Justice*.

⁴ *Inteqal* is the Dari and Pashtu word for transition and refers to the process by which the lead responsibility for security in Afghanistan was transferred from the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to the ANSF.

⁵ In the Asia Foundation's 2013 survey, 93 per cent of Afghans said the Afghan army was 'honest and fair,' 91 per cent believed it had helped improve security in Afghanistan, and 88 per cent said they had confidence in the institution (Asia Foundation 2013).

⁶ This includes weapons such as rifles, pistols, machine guns, grenade launchers, and shotguns.

⁷ Promoting democratic civilian control and good governance principles is a foundational pillar of SSR. As the UK government stated in a 2003 report, a stable and effective security sector requires 'well-managed and competent personnel operating within an effective institutional framework defined by law.' By extension, 'a badly managed and unprofessional security sector' could not only undercut the viability of the security architecture but trigger broader insecurity and instability (UK Government 2003: 3).

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