

A “New” Strategy for Afghanistan and Its Region

The Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination (LISD) at Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs convened a private workshop, “A Strategy for Afghanistan and Its Region,” May 7-10, 2009 in Triesenberg, Liechtenstein. The workshop’s aim was to discuss in-depth the strategy of the Obama Administration toward Afghanistan and its region and to formulate additional recommendations. Some twenty leading international experts from the region, Asia, Europe and the United States participated. The meeting was co-funded by LISD, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, and the Stiftung für Selbstbestimmung und Internationale Beziehungen (SiBiL) in Vaduz, Liechtenstein. The workshop was co-chaired by Francisc Vendrell and Wolfgang Danspeckgruber.

There was general agreement among the participants that the Obama Administration’s new Afghanistan strategy resembles a strategic framework more than a specific strategy. This new framework for policy towards Afghanistan has been expanded to include a combined focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan, what is sometime referred to as “Af-Pak;” a surge of international civilian advisers and military forces and a major increase of civilian personnel, planning for a more rapid transfer of responsibility for security to the Afghan government; and an increased engagement with international actors, including neighboring and other regional states. The new US administration is clearly intent on selling the urgent need for increased international focus on Afghanistan. However, some perceive the Obama Administration’s approach as a step in the development of an overall US exit strategy from Afghanistan.

Some workshop participants suggested that the new Obama framework is missing several aspects, including a concrete political strategy with specifics on how the civilian surge will occur and how democracy and institution-building will be supported, and a plan that distinguishes Al-Qaeda from that of the Taliban insurgency. Moreover, there is unfortunately no change in the international community’s thinking of a political strategy of supporting individuals to a more



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effective policy of supporting institutions and programs. Overall, participants agreed that the international community, with the leadership of the United States, should have a clear and consistent strategy of supporting democratic institutions in Afghanistan and should convey that it intends to be in Afghanistan for the longer term. This clear international commitment is needed to fight off defeatist thinking and to avoid “fatigue” both among Afghans toward the international community, and among members of the international community toward continued high levels of involvement in Afghanistan. This international commitment is also needed to foster a consistent, coordinated and prioritized approach for international engagement that avoids wasteful duplication in these difficult economic times.

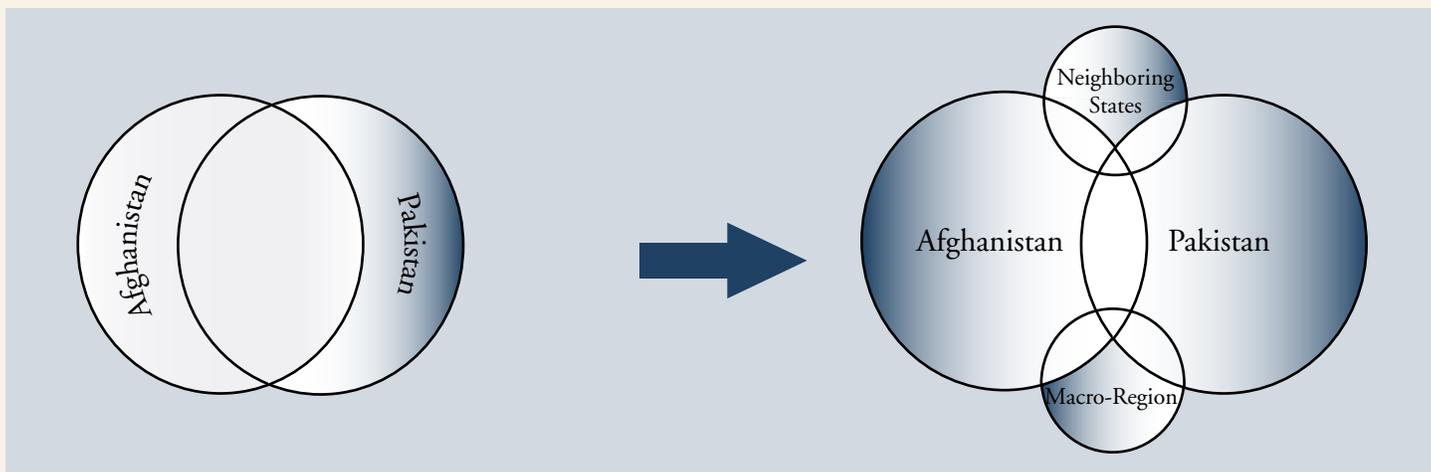
RECOMMENDATIONS

Afghanistan Policy

Move from an Af-Pak policy towards separate strategies for Afghanistan and Pakistan, with overlap on the border.

The Af-Pak policy focuses on both countries as one sphere for international involvement. This policy approach offends both countries’ nationalist sentiments, downplays other important regions in both countries, and detracts from a needed focus on the building of political institutions in both countries. Focusing on Af-Pak in fact downgrades the attention to the problematic Durand Line border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, while giving insufficient attention to issues such as the Quetta Shura and Taliban base in Baluchistan, the need to increase resource distribution to the insurgency-free yet poor provinces in the rest of Afghanistan, and the Kashmir issue in Pakistan.

The current policy on Afghanistan and Pakistan should move from one of two concentric circles of policies towards these two countries, which currently largely overlap, to one where there are two circles of policies, which only overlap



with respect to the border and insurgency issue between these two countries. It should also include enhanced cooperation with neighboring states like Iran and significant regional states like India and those in Central Asia.

Regional Cooperation

Focus on bilateral confidence-building measures, supporting regional cooperation and Afghan state-building, rather than establishing new institutions or contact groups.

Supporting regional cooperation is necessary for securing Afghanistan's future. However, the new strategy should not create new groups and contact organizations that could add further bureaucratic layers. Regional cooperation on Afghanistan should be furthered by a sequential strategy: first holding bilateral talks, making agreements, and then engaging in regional multinational meetings to further development in Afghanistan and the region. This cooperation should involve neighbors and members from the broader region such as Iran, the Central Asian states, China, India and Russia.

Nexus of Drugs-Insurgency-Corruption

Break the drugs-insurgency-corruption nexus by publicly focusing on key actors and their financial safe-havens.

While the international community's current Afghan policy acknowledges the links between the rising drug economy, corruption among government officials, and the funding of the insurgency, no specific measures have been identified to

address these linkages. A strategy to address the drugs-insurgency-corruption nexus should target the channels that are funding the war economy. This should be done by publicly naming and adding key narco-traffickers and their financial backers to the UN 1267 sanction lists and strengthening economic sanctions against governments and actors which offer financial safe-havens for narcotics monies.

Taliban Insurgency

Move from a policy concentrating on Al-Qaeda to a strategy focused on the Taliban insurgency and its political and institutional underpinnings.

The current policy has focused too heavily on the threat of Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan and not enough on the various strands of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan. The current policy has also emphasized military solutions, thereby neglecting the political underpinning of the rising Taliban insurgency. The lack of rule of law, rampant corruption, insecurity and a decreasing conviction that the government and its international backers can deliver, are driving Afghans to turn to the otherwise largely unpopular Taliban insurgents. Moreover, the current policy has focused on the northern border between Afghanistan and Pakistan, despite the Taliban Quetta Shura being located in the southwestern Pakistani city of Quetta, and despite a majority of drug production and insurgent attacks in Afghanistan taking place in southern Afghan provinces.

The new strategy for Afghanistan should highlight the necessity of combating the Taliban insurgency rather than focusing on fighting Al-Qaeda. Institution-building and combating corruption should be seen as a means of countering and preventing the rise of the insurgency. The new strategy should also focus on addressing the causes of the insurgency by building basic rule of law and Afghan civilian capacity in order to strengthen the government's delivery of services to the Afghan people.

Reconciliation

Lay the enabling groundwork before pursuing reconciliation with the insurgents.

Talking about reconciliation with Afghan insurgents, before ensuring the existence of an enabling environment conducive to real negotiations, threatens to be counterproductive. Moreover, talking about reconciliation in an environment of widespread insecurity gives the impression of negotiating from a position of weakness and has led to confusion among the Afghan population as to the objectives of such talks and as to the firmness of the international community's commitment to democratic principles.

Reconciliation talks should be held once international and Afghan troops have turned back the tide of insurgents and secured the majority of areas under Taliban rule. A new strategy for reconciliation in Afghanistan must be coordinated with the Afghan government, involve neutral international intermediaries, and include clear "red lines" for negotiation agreed upon by all actors. Such a process should start with talks with insurgent provincial commanders who may be fighting less out of an Islamist ideology but rather out of localized grievances. Members of "moderate Taliban" could be reintegrated and involved in political life after some manifest form of apology or other proof that they have left the Taliban.

Income Generation

Focus greater funding for secure areas on income and employment generation programs in order to prevent future recruitment in these areas by the Taliban insurgents.

The current policy has delivered disproportionately little

aid to the more secure areas of northern, western and central Afghanistan and the delivered aid has been in the form of short-term projects, such as the building of roads. Yet short-term projects without a longer-term strategy for job and income generation is unlikely to stem insurgency. The inequity of funding between the different areas of Afghanistan needs to be addressed by having a greater balance in aid allocation and by focusing economic aid on long-term, income-generating projects.

Infrastructure and Energy

Combined efforts between the Afghans and the international community to strengthen crucial infrastructure such as railroads, power generation and mining activities could catalyze the economy and offer a new, sustainable dynamic.

The construction of an Afghan railway network offers a significant opportunity for Afghanistan, its neighboring countries and the region. Afghanistan is situated at the center of a potentially significant East-West and North-South transit cross, and development of its railways would connect it to neighboring countries, catalyze trade, and offer easy connection to Europe and to South Asia. Within Afghanistan, swift and affordable transportation could increase economic development and diminish Taliban footholds among local communities. The construction process would offer tremendous employment and income potential. Such a railway network would be a significant new source of sustainable job creation, income and local ownership and pride; facilitate a private-public partnership between international investors and local Afghan labor and security; and encourage the transportation of bulk and heavy loads for mining and other emerging industries in Afghanistan and its region.

Infrastructure projects provide an opening for international cooperation with three critical regional players, but Afghan buy-in will be the most important. However, these projects will take time, patience and the ability to convince the Afghans - from ethnic, tribal and religious leaders to local administrators, governors and national authorities - of their value.

Infrastructure projects should have a regional component as transport corridors require the participation of Afghani-

stan's neighbors. Besides the connections to the West, the North and the East and Southeast, Afghanistan also needs a ring-railroad parallel to the road from Herat to Mazar and from Herat to Kandahar, and eastward and north to Kabul. When considering the regional component, it will be important to address in the early planning stage the difference of the rail gauge as Afghanistan's neighbors use three different ones: Iran and China use the standard rail gauge, Central Asian states use the Russian rail gauge, and Pakistan and India use a gauge larger than both the standard and the Russian gauges. There would be a possibility to combine the standard with the one used by Pakistan and India.

Institutional Capacity

Build Afghan institutional capacity by focusing on effective national programs and funding mechanisms, and by ensuring that the international "civilian surge" is well-calibrated to help surge Afghan institutional capacity.

The aim of international aid should be on building Afghan capacity in order to help manage and deliver development. Yet international aid to Afghanistan has been poorly coordinated. Each country prefers to direct aid through their own channels and subcontractors, rather than supporting centrally administered and coordinated funding mechanisms such as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF). In addition, greater resources should be devoted to effective programs such as the National Solidarity Program (NSP).

The current discussion of an international "civilian surge" is heavily focused on increasing the number of civilian advisors to Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). However, channeling the civilian surge through PRTs is unlikely to help build Afghan institutional capacity. The absence of a thoughtful or detailed plan for the civilian surge gives the impression that it will remain largely subordinated to the military surge, with potentially disastrous implications for the longer term.

The impact of mentoring Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) forces remains questionable. Moreover, mentoring cannot supplant efforts to improve structural and organizational flaws within Afghanistan's security forces, nor can these forces only be modeled after US forces.

United Nations

Support efforts to strengthen the impartial role for the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).

UNAMA's role has changed over the years. Its reputation as an impartial actor has been challenged, partly due to its association in the eyes of Afghans with a highly flawed electoral process. It is essential to the security, development and political outreach efforts of the international community that UNAMA be an unbiased and impartial intermediary. Future elections will be an important vehicle to do so.

Media

Support the use of media to better disseminate information, counter Taliban propaganda, and help manage Afghan expectations of the international community.

The Taliban has been effective at using various media to disseminate their propaganda. In contrast, the efforts undertaken by the Afghan government and the international community are less known, particularly in rural and insecure areas. The Obama strategy should strengthen the use of existing media to wage an effective media campaign that disseminates information about reconstruction efforts by the Afghan government and the international community.

SPECIAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS

The August 20, 2009 Afghanistan presidential elections are one of the most critical, immediate events which will shape Afghan perceptions on whether to support and trust Afghanistan's nascent government institutions and international backers. The importance of supporting reasonably free, fair and thereby legitimate elections cannot be underestimated. Afghans must perceive that their vote matters, that the level of irregularity remains within reasonable limits, that there is no particular candidate who enjoys the tacit backing of the international community, and that the system provides for a relatively level playing field.

The August 2009 presidential elections are likely to be much more fiercely contested than the 2004 elections and the resulting winner will be more likely to have problems of legitimacy. President Karzai received 55.4 percent of the vote in 2004 when popular support for him was much higher. This year there is a strong possibility that none of the 41 presidential candidates will receive the required 50 percent of the vote. If this occurs, it will trigger Article 61 of the Afghan constitution, which mandates a second round of elections for the two candidates with the most votes within two weeks of the declaration of results. The international community and Afghan institutions are ill-prepared for such a scenario.

The opinion among many international scholars is that the upcoming Afghan presidential elections are likely to be plagued by fraud. Recent events in Iran demonstrate that an election process perceived by a large portion of the population as fraudulent may lead to serious post-election unrest. It is therefore all the more important that the US and the international community do their utmost to support a free and fair election process, including the preparation for the high probability of a second round of elections in September 2009.

The US and the international community needs to be seen as impartial and supportive of democratic processes, regardless of the likelihood of outcome. Only by supporting the democratic election process in Afghanistan are the US and the international community likely to increase their legitimacy and thereby turn the tide of Afghan opinion in their favor.

UNAMA

The role of UNAMA as an impartial entity must be increased. Having an impartial entity assist in the maintenance of the integrity of the elections is crucial to election legitimacy. The US should push to strengthen UN impartiality and have UNAMA put all its expertise to use to maintain human rights standards and governance during the elections. Bilateral and multilateral organizations should be marshaled to focus on the election process.

Security

With the decision to count ballots at the district level, there is a high probability of fraud. This is especially true in the insecure areas of the country. It is essential that security be improved in advance of and during the elections.

Level the Playing Field for Presidential Candidates

The elections process must ensure a credible method of candidate vetting. Candidates or their constituents who have violated the law should be publicly named. A credible effort must also be made to prevent the use of state power to pressure people to vote for a particular candidate. To adequately level the playing field for presidential candidates, there must also be public funding of candidates, the provision of security for candidates and their campaign staffs, and logistical support for candidates' travel to the provinces.

Finally, there must also be a guarantee of equal access to the media. This is necessary to help ensure that all candidates have access to private and public Afghan media and that no candidates misuse access to public media to further their own political candidacies. Funds should be provided for buying time on commercial media channels for all candidates meeting political finance requirements.

Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG)

The DIAG process must be supported. Greater emphasis on and funding for the DIAG process by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and UNAMA would help decrease the links between some presidential candidates and armed groups.

Fraud and the Registration Process

Current irregularities in the registration process should be highlighted and mechanisms for dealing with fraud should be established. There are already widespread reports of irregularities in the registration process, particularly in the insecure areas of the Southeastern part of the country. These reports of, for example, over 50 percent of registrants being female, are contributing to a perception that the election is already being stolen. It is essential that these irregularities receive widespread media attention and that they are dealt with immediately.

Insurgent and Criminal Network Funding

Existing efforts to rein in insurgent and criminal network funding should be immediately strengthened. The UN 1267 sanction lists and bilateral engagement should be utilized to decrease insurgent and criminal networks' capital outflow and inflow from Afghanistan to havens in Russia, other countries and the UAE.

Political Finance Regulations

In order to encourage transparency and credibility of the electoral process, it is essential that the US not only encourage adherence to existing political finance regulations, but also to the reform of these regulations. Reforms should include empowering an independent regulatory enforcement agency that monitors election funding of political candidates.

International Election Observers

Election fraud between the 2004 presidential elections and the 2005 parliamentary elections increased four-fold. Election fraud is likely to be even higher in the August 2009 elections, especially if there are only a few election observers. It is key that the UN and individual countries, including the US, send large contingents of election observers as a signal of their commitment to the election process. There should be contingency plans for sending election observers in the event of a second round of elections in September.

Presidential Election Second Round

A plan for the strong possibility of a second round to the presidential election must be devised. Given the likelihood of a second round, run-off election an analysis of the different possible outcomes and factors that might influence the outcome should be undertaken. Adequate human, financial and security resources beyond those allotted for the August 20 election should be put into place for a second round. The very need to hold a second round of voting could radically alter the Afghan political environment, creating a perception that the stakes at that point are extremely high, and international actors should do the best that they can to prepare for the unexpected.

Participants:

Shanthie D'Souza, Associate Fellow, Institute for Defense Studies and Analyses

Wolfgang Danspeckgruber, Director, LISD; Chair, Liechtenstein Colloquium on European and International Affairs

Robert P. Finn, LISD Senior Research Associate; former US Ambassador to Afghanistan

Bruce Koepke, Head, UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, Iran

Sari Kouvo, Senior Program Fellow, International Center for Transitional Justice; Co-Director, Afghanistan Analysts Network

William Maley, Director, Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy, Australian National University

Dominik Marxer, Deputy Permanent Representative of Liechtenstein to the Council of Europe

Talatbek Masadykov, Chief, UNAMA Political Affairs Division, Kabul Headquarters

Aly Mawji, Permanent Representative, Aga Khan Development Network in Afghanistan

Rani Mullen, SIBIL/LISD Fellow; Visiting Scholar, South Asian Studies and International Development, The Johns Hopkins University

Thomas Ruttig, Co-Director, Afghanistan Analysts Network; Visiting Fellow, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik

Eckart Schiewek, Political Advisor to the Special Representative of the Secretary General, UNAMA

Michael Semple, Independent Analysis, Afghanistan-Pakistan

Barbara Stapleton, Senior Political Advisor, Office of the EU Special Representative for Afghanistan

Koichiro Tanaka, Director, JIME Center; Board Member, Institute of Energy Economics

Robert Templer, Asia Program Director, International Crisis Group

Martine van Bijlert, Co-Director, Afghanistan Analysts Network; former Political Advisor, Office of the EU Special Representative for Afghanistan

Francesc Vendrell, LISD Senior Visiting Fellow; Frederick H. Schultz '51 Professor of International Policy, Woodrow Wilson School, Princeton University; former EU Special Representative for Afghanistan

Marvin Weinbaum, Scholar-in-Residence, Middle East Institute; Professor Emeritus, University of Illinois

Andrew Wilder, Research Director, Feinstein International Center, Tufts University

Nick Williams, Deputy to the NATO Senior Civilian Representative, Afghanistan

