

International Intervention in Afghanistan: Prospects for peace and stability in the transformation decade

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Mantraya, Strategy, Innovation, Alternatives

Following the 9/11 attacks, an international military intervention in Afghanistan targeted the Taliban–Al Qaeda combine. The immediate result was the dislodging of the Taliban regime. However, close to a decade and half later, the goal of establishing order and stabilising Afghanistan has not been met. Presence of plethora of actors with differing goals and diverse range of activity have added to the complexities of achieving long term stability in Afghanistan. Lack of a unified vision and consequent lack of unity of effort has led to dissipated efforts. The inadequate understanding of the nature of state in Afghanistan among the international actors trying to shape the country's future has impacted stabilisation project. Not surprisingly, with the commencement of NATO drawdown in Afghanistan there are concerns of the reversal the fragile gains of the last decade. This paper is a stock taking exercise of the international community's role in the reconstruction of security, political, economic, and governance sectors in the last decade. It attempts to provide an alternative course of action for the international community in the transformation decade (2014-2024) to usher in durable peace and long term stability in Afghanistan.

Key Words: Military Intervention, stability, drawdown, peace, transformation.

Nature of the International intervention in Afghanistan (2001-14)

The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) invoked Article Five of its Charter following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States (US). The Article seeks the involvement of the organisation's members to come to the aid of any member state subject to an armed attack. The deployment of NATO-led ISAF mission in Afghanistan was the result of this measure. With NATO leading the ISAF, Afghanistan emerged as an important area of cooperation outside its traditional Euro Atlantic theatre. On December 20, 2001, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) commenced its mission in Afghanistan on as an UN-mandated European organisation. Two years later, in 2003, it became a NATO-led mission (Gallis, 2007). While the US-led ISAF mission's activities were limited only to Kabul, the NATO-led ISAF took entire Afghanistan under its ambit assisting the government in Kabul "exercising and extending its authority and influence across the country, paving the way for reconstruction and effective governance" (NATO, 2015b). Four years later, in 2007, another expansion in NATO's role occurred. The Resolution 1776 of September 17, 2007 allowed the organisation not just to disarm the militias, but also undertake measures to "reform the justice system, train a national police force and army, provide security for elections, and combat the narcotics industry" (Morelli and Belkin, 2009).

The US foreign policy towards Afghanistan underwent a significant transformation under President Barack Obama. By emphasizing on diplomacy and multilateralism, Obama's campaign period pledge rephrased the American engagement in Afghanistan as a "NATO mission" (Silva, 2009), an endeavour that is based on not just greater NATO participation in the war, but sought increased financial contribution from the NATO allies. Obama, in accordance with his election campaign pledge of renewed focus on the 'just war' in Afghanistan, called for a winding down of the 'unnecessary war of choice' in Iraq, while committing 17,000 new troops for combat in Afghanistan and a further 4,000 personnel for training local troops. In a speech on December 1, 2009 at West Point, Obama announced the troop surge, and yet linked this additional deployment to an eventual withdrawal of forces, to begin in 2011.

Counter terrorism Vs Counter-insurgency approach

Insurgency and Counter-insurgency (COIN) are subsets of warfare. In response to a dynamic insurgency, the nature of COIN constantly evolves. Insurgency attempts to control a contested political space. The COIN campaign, on the other hand, involves, all means- military, economic, political, psychological as well as civic action programmes- to surmount insurgency (Kilcullen, 2007). Military means alone are insufficient to win over insurgencies. The need, hence, is to synchronize both military as well as non-military methods. The role played by various agencies, international as well as local organisations hence become critical to making COIN effective. Due to the role of multiplicity of actors, it is essential that all actors work towards a common end state, by adhering to the broad principle of unity of effort. This not only has the capacity to neutralize threats from insurgents, but can build effective institutions that extend the influence of the host government and augment its capacity in providing basic services to its people.

The predominant narrative on Afghanistan is one of violence that has spiraled in spite of the troop surge. This has not only spread instability, but has painted the prevalent COIN strategy as one that is ineffective. The principal problems are easy to identify. These include among others COIN strategy that lacks unified effort, an aid distribution strategy that suffers from coordination mismatches, and little effort in shoring up the Afghan government's capacities and image in the eyes of its own population. Afghanistan's landscape is dotted with a huge array actors. The multiple layers of interaction involves the Afghan government, the international donors, the non-governmental organisations, and also the international military forces. This is a complex web of interaction without much coordination. Each of these agencies and organisations have different perceptions of reconstruction, divergent operational approaches and a chronic unwillingness to coordinate their efforts with the Afghan government. In the absence of common vision and consequent lack of unified effort, such complex and divergent approaches have accentuated Afghanistan's internal and regional contradictions. Peace and stability, as a result, remain elusive.

Relevance of NATO in stabilising Afghanistan

The NATO mission in Afghanistan was a test case for the allies' military capabilities. It further sought to assess their political will, especially in view of the difficulties involved and the possibilities of a decline in popular support back home. However, it was important for the 'new NATO', somewhat rechristened during its 1999 Washington Summit to undertake the mission. NATO, to its constituents, was capable of being a part of military operations dealing with terrorism and WMD proliferation threats beyond its conventional theatre- the Europe. This change in overall mission initially reflected a NATO consensus that the principal dangers to allied security lie distant from the treaty area and require new political tools and military capabilities to combat them (Morelli & Belkin, 2009). The organisations battled against the pessimistic perceptions that the Afghan war could very well be unwinnable, which in the long run could generate negative publicity impacting on troop contribution. Initially 5000 NATO troops were allocated to Afghanistan. By January 2014, however, the numbers had swelled to 57,004 from 48 countries, which included all the 26 NATO countries (Gallis, 2007). In November 2014, the numbers fell to 28,360 after countries embarked upon withdrawal (NATO, 2015a). By February 2015, it fell further to 13195 soldiers including 6839 from the US drawn from 40 countries. (NATO, 2015c) In January 1, 2015, NATO launched the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) to train, advise and assist the Afghan security forces.

ISAF operations in Afghanistan have exposed the faultlines in the Alliance (Noetzel and Schreer, 2009) as NATO continued to grapple with ways and means to deal with the rising violence caused by the Taliban-led insurgency. The essential problem of coordination in the military sphere arose due to the presence of two major international military coalitions- the US led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and the UN-mandated and NATO-led mission ISAF. The Bush administration attempted to merge both, only to face resistance from Britain, Germany, and France. Stabilisation rather than combat mission was emphasised as NATO's role by Britain and Germany. Britain, in particular, leading the ISAF counter-narcotics effort, intended to retain the initiative in the political sphere of winning hearts and minds. Germany, on the other hand, opposed a merger of the commands because German forces in ISAF were trained only for stabilisation and not for COIN operations. The French were concerned that the administration, with a US commander in place to guide all military activity, might use NATO as a toolbox to accomplish Washington's broader objectives in Afghanistan (Krishnappa, D'Souza and Singh, 2009).

For the entire duration of its presence, NATO's efforts remained hampered by the reluctance of its members to provide troops and resources for the Afghan mission (Inderfurth, 2007 & DSouza, 2009). There were conflicting national agendas and caveats at work, imposed by NATO allies on their forces in Afghanistan. The COIN operations were mired by risk avoidance and risk-aversion strategy. While the Obama administration managed to effect a US troop surge, a similar call by NATO commanders for more troops evoked only a partial response. The distinction maintained between NATO countries of being a stabilisation force or a fighting force remained the reason behind what clearly emerged as two-tier alliance. Only some NATO members were willing to fight for establishing security. Others had a different vision. In February 2008, Robert Gates, the then US Defence Secretary warned the future of NATO is at risk due to differences over Afghanistan. He said that NATO may become a two-tier alliance (BBC, 2008).

Security

International military presence of 14 long years and pledges to rebuilding Afghanistan notwithstanding, a deadly Taliban-led insurgency continues to pose a serious security threat to the country. Many lethal strikes have been carried out by the insurgents against the international and Afghan forces as well as the civilians. Since 2006, the levels of violence and insurgent attacks have significantly increased (Guardian, 2013). A similar trend continues in 2015. While analysts argue that the troop surge achieved notable security gains, these gains remain fragile. Violence peaked in 2011, the worst year since the Taliban were dislodged from Kabul in 2001. The planned security transition (*inteqal*) met with several challenges, including insurgent attacks on NATO units, increase in green on blue attacks and rising civilian casualties. These developments eventually resulted in the USA being compelled to relinquish its right to carry out night raids and to hand over control of the main coalition prison to the Afghan Government, in an attempt to advance negotiations on a convoluted Strategic Partnership Agreement with Afghanistan.

From 2007 the Taliban placed less emphasis on ambushes and fire-fights, in the course of which they tended to suffer heavy casualties, and relied more on the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and suicide attacks. As a result, there was an increase in the average number of security incidents recorded per month, from 741 in 2008 to 960 in 2009, while the number of security incidents in January 2010 was 40 percent higher than one year earlier. Thus, while the augmented forces of ISAF, combined with the Afghan Government's growing security forces, had some successes in reducing the Taliban presence in some areas of the country during 2009–10, the Taliban's ascendance, especially the expansion of areas of operation into the relatively stable north and west, remained an increasing concern. From 2011 some further changes in the Taliban's strategy became evident, with a series of spectacular, high-profile attacks and a highly co-ordinated 'spring offensive' capturing considerable public and media attention. In the run up to the presidential elections in April 2014 and drawdown, increased targeting and attacks were carried out on hotels and restaurants frequented by foreigners in Kabul - the La Taverna du Liban, a popular Lebanese restaurant in Kabul (17 January 2014) and the Serena hotel (21 March 2014). Attacks on journalists increased in 2014. Swedish radio journalist Nils Horner was killed by unidentified gunmen in Kabul in March. In the same month, Sardar Ahmed of the AFP was killed in the attacks on Serena Hotel and two Western female journalists of the Associated press were targeted at a police compound by a man in a police uniform in the eastern city of Khost in April which killed Anja Niedringhaus and injured Kathy Gannon.

Initially in Afghanistan's south and the east, the international forces were unable to hold on to areas cleared of insurgents. Inadequate number of troops and insufficient resources on the ground meant that the Afghan countryside remained insecure. The ratio of NATO and US troops to the Afghan population was 1:653. In real terms, this translated to one tenth of the necessary force level to effect stability in areas absent of insurgency. Afghanistan has the lowest international troop to population ratio of 1:1115, as per a 2004 estimate. (Bhatia, Lanigan and Wilkinson, 2004) Moreover, since the international forces remained engaged mostly in clear and sweep operations and did not concentrate on holding cleared off areas, their ability to secure areas on a long term basis and cultivate relations with local Afghans suffered.

The use of air power by the US military, in its efforts to target Taliban fighters, has resulted in considerable collateral damage and civilian casualties. The Afghan legislature and the former Afghan President Karzai demanded that the international military exercise greater restraint in their operations. This led to new rules

of engagement adopted by international forces, in an attempt to reduce the risk of civilian casualties. The Afghan government took control of nationwide security in January 2014. President Karzai announced the security handover at a military academy outside Kabul and pledged that Afghan forces are ready to take on the insurgents. According to the Afghan Ministry of Defence, in 2010 810 Afghan soldiers were killed in operations. Between April and November 2012, another 830 ANA members were killed. The Afghan Council of Ministers in February 2014 put the total number of Afghan security forces killed in the past 13 years (till June 2013) at 13729. An additional 16511 Afghan soldiers and police officers had been injured.

There are varying opinions about the increasing capability and preparedness among the ANSF. Initially, the ANA had been primarily employed to augment the international forces' COIN operations. By mid-2008 its role had expanded and it was reportedly leading 62 percent of the operations. In 2011, the ISAF was conducting over 90 percent of its operations in conjunction with the ANA. In 2012, according to Afghan official sources, the ANA planned and led 80 percent of the combat operations. However, the rapid pace at which recruitment for both the ANA and the ANP has been made is said to have compromised the quality of the personnel recruited. According to a 2012 US Department of Defense report (Peter, 2012), only 13 of the 156 Afghan army battalions were being deemed as 'independent with advisers'. Only 74 were regarded as 'effective with advisers'.

Nonetheless, the ANA's performance remained noteworthy during the high-profile insurgent attacks from 2011. According to the Afghan Ministry of the Interior, 3328 insurgents were killed and 3480 were detained in operations carried out by Afghan forces and the NATO-led coalition or ISAF troops in 2012. While the project of raising a capable and independent ANA had been realised to an extent, questions regarding capabilities of the Afghan National Police (ANP) and establishing rule of law remained relevant. An under-trained and under-manned ANP had almost no presence in Afghan villages. In urban centres, they had only minimal control. The ANA, in comparison, was relatively successful. However, even this force suffered from chronic deficiencies. Resources, arms and equipment, training module, desertion and infiltration by the insurgents remained some of the most commented upon shortcomings. The fact that Afghanistan could turn into a hyper-militarised state without adequate resources to support its bloated military was a different and insurmountable issue. This development, arguably unavoidable, created new challenges of civil-military relations. On the other hand, there are concerns among Afghans that reducing the numbers of the ANSF for funding reasons ignores the needs on the ground.

The net beneficiaries of such limited vision of nation-building were the insurgents. Powerful warlords, militias, drug trade and inadequacies of security sector reform (Sedra, 2006) emboldened the insurgents. The international community's failed counter-narcotic strategy is an example of this trend. The US was not averse to using like aerial spraying, considered a forceful means to deal with the problem. However, the NATO countries feared that such means if adopted would defeat the very purpose of the heart and minds campaign among the Afghans, undermine support for the government of President Hamid Karzai, alienate the local populace, and provide a support base for the Taliban.

Drugs remained a significant major source insurgent funding. A complex network of Taliban-affiliated groups, their cross-border networks, and the support they elicited from local commanders, ensured that the drugs flowed rather seamlessly from Afghanistan into Central Asia, Iran, Pakistan, Russia, China, and India. The Taliban and organised crime gangs even managed to influence drug prices. In 2010, for example, they reportedly withheld 12400 tonnes of opium, worth about \$1.25bn, from the international market to keep the price of heroin and opium at a profitable level (Syal, 2010).

The USA and Afghanistan signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement in May 2012. According to the Agreement, a considerable number of international troops, mostly American, will remain in Afghanistan, providing strategic support to the ANSF even after 2014. Additionally, the coalition countries, particularly the USA, will continue to grant financial assistance to Afghanistan for the foreseeable future. The pact was expected to be supplemented within a year by a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) that would provide for a residual US military presence beyond 2014. While President Karzai refused to sign the BSA, only in September 2014, President Ashraf Ghani put his signature on the Agreement, after the formation of the National Unity Government.

Political

A strong Afghan government remained a critical necessity for Afghanistan's long-term security and development. Success of the international community's COIN campaign depended significantly on building an effective government and governance in Afghanistan. The war in Iraq, however, appeared to have pushed these basic necessities to the background. The need for initiating a nation-building exercise in Afghanistan remained neglected for the Bush Presidency and the NATO.

Afghanistan's democratic process continued to be challenged by the security situation, issues in governance and near absence of rule of law. Wide ranging political reforms, which had become a necessity remained unaddressed. The Afghan Constitution's inherent limitations were evident while dealing with disputes between government's different branches and jurisdictions of institutions over governing elections. Government led by former President Karzai was perceived as 'weak, inefficient and corrupt'. Lieutenant General Karl Eikenberry, who served as US ambassador to Afghanistan once said that the greatest long-term threat to success in Afghanistan is 'the potential irretrievable loss of legitimacy of the government of Afghanistan'. He specifically cited corruption, justice, and law enforcement as responsible (Jones and Pickering, 2008). Presence of individuals with direct ties to the country's warlords, a number of individuals closely associated with the drug trade were elected to the parliament (DeGrasse and Hsu, 2005). International community's attempts to convince President Karzai to pave way for direct role for political parties in the election process went unheeded. Afghan politics as a result remained fragmented and its legislative process often immobilized. The President and the legislature had divergent views over the introduction of electoral and other key legal reforms.

The 5 April 2014 Presidential election, third in post-2001 Afghanistan, constituted the country's first democratic leadership change. Coming ahead of the ISAF drawdown at the end of 2014, candidates formed multi-ethnic three-person teams, one for President and two for Vice President posts, thereby maximizing their appeal to diverse vote banks. Former warlords and regional commanders as well as technocrats and moderates were candidates. This coalition building was indicative of the electoral compulsions which weaved together a team, necessary to bridge the ethno-tribal divide and bring about reform oriented agenda.

Among the several shifts witnessed in Afghan politics, the increase in the sheer number and mixture of veteran traditional leaders and new candidates, thereby providing greater options for the average voter and the tilt away from individual-based politics to issue-based politics are significant. The formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) between Dr. Ashraf Ghani and Dr. Abdullah prevented street protests from turning violent and further polarization. Moreover, the protracted electoral dispute in the runoff Presidential elections underlined several challenges to the Afghan political sector. The author's discussions with election officials, observers representing political parties and persons on the street narratives in Kabul in August-September 2014 revealed that the ability of the Afghan Independent Electoral Commission to play an impartial role could have implications for the future conduct of elections in the country. The viability of the NUG would remain linked to its ability to move away from the patronage network based approach to long term institution building and reforms. The country needs a range of electoral reforms ahead of the parliamentary elections.

Peace Talks

As the search for a political solution intensified, negotiations with the Taliban were being explored as part of an Afghan reconciliation process. Individual and uncoordinated attempts at negotiations with the Taliban emerged as the alternative conflict management strategy for the NATO countries. The USA has been persistent in trying to bring about peace talks involving high-level Taliban leaders and, to this end, sanctioned the establishment of a Taliban political office in Qatar in January 2012, while also endorsing efforts to reconcile middle- and lower-level insurgent leaders and their followers. In 2011 US diplomats took the initiative in exploring the possibilities of holding talks. When Ambassador Marc Grossman assumed the position of US Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan in February 2011, following the death of Richard Holbrooke, the diplomatic focus that had been on a strategic dialogue to improve Afghan governance became instead a dedicated pursuit of reconciliation. Bringing high-level insurgents into talks was being explored as a strategy of co-option that would splinter/ fracture the insurgency and thus have a demoralizing effect on Taliban combatants. US Secretary of State

Hillary Clinton described US policy during congressional testimony in October 2011 as 'fight, talk and build' (DeYoung, 2011).

With the reconciliation strategy gaining momentum, it was unclear whether the process had received favourable sanctions of the Taliban leadership or was merely attempting to weave a narrative of success by involving irrelevant insurgent figures and impostors. The lack of credible information on the identity of the interlocutors was a lesser problem. Among the critical obstacles were the US proposal to retain bases within Afghanistan beyond 2014. Apart from the fact that the Taliban demanded a complete withdrawal of the Americans from Afghan soil, even President Karzai expressed concerns that the presence of US troops would be an impediment for negotiations with the Taliban. In spite of an abandoned move to win over the Taliban by releasing imprisoned Taliban commanders from the US detention centre at Guantánamo Bay that led the Taliban to suspend the peace talks in March 2012, both the US and the Karzai administration continued with their efforts to arrive at peace with the insurgents. The announcement of the drawdown of forces meant that the Taliban perceives a sense of victory and the inability of the Afghan government and international community to negotiate from a position of strength.

Several countries (the US, the United Kingdom, Germany, Norway, France and Japan) continued unilateral and parallel negotiation efforts by providing avenues and establishing contacts outside Afghanistan. This belittled the Afghan Government's nascent efforts at peace-building through the High Peace Council (HPC) and the Afghan Peace and Reintegration Programme (APRP). In September 2011, killing of the HPC head and former President Burhanuddin Rabbani by a Taliban 'peace emissary' provided a serious setback to the process and underlined the roadblocks towards a peace settlement.

The international troop drawdown has added a renewed urgency for a negotiated settlement with the Taliban. In June 2013 Taliban representatives opened an office in Doha, Qatar, which US President Obama described as 'an important first step toward reconciliation'. Nearly one year after announcing that it was suspending all dialogue with the US, a number of high-ranking Taliban officials travelled to Qatar, the location of the previous talks, apparently in an effort to revive the process. President Karzai opposed the process and declared that the Afghan Government would not take part in peace talks with the insurgents unless they were 'Afghan-led'. The Doha process was stalled. In February 2014, a number of Taliban fighters were set free from Bagram prison. The US too, in May 2014, transferred five senior Taliban leaders from Guantánamo Bay to Qatar in return for a US soldier Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, who was in Taliban custody since June 2009. Under President Ghani, the Afghan government is continuing to make outreach efforts towards the Taliban but the road map of the peace process remains uncertain.

Economic and Governance

Isolating or separating the civilians from the warlords, drug lords, and insurgents, and giving them an alternate economic choice is one of the crucial COIN strategies. However, Afghanistan remains heavily dependent on foreign aid. According to the World Bank, Afghanistan receives about \$3 billion annually in foreign assistance, which is an increase from \$1.3 billion in 2002. The dependence on foreign aid for a rentier state (Rubin, 2002) creates problems of accountability and aid absorption. Afghan government remains incapable of exploiting its mineral and agricultural resources, raise its own revenues, and offset its aid dependence. For this state of affairs, the nature of the delivery of foreign aid assistance remains somewhat responsible.

According to modest estimates, 70 percent of international assistance is channeled through various contracts, subcontracts, embassies, Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), and other forms of alternative delivery mechanisms. Use of subcontractors widened the scope for corruption. In a survey conducted by Integrity Watch Afghanistan (IWA) in May 2008, 64 percent of respondents considered that the aid was marred by some form of corruption and another 60 percent said that more than 40 per cent of aid has been wasted through corruption'. 92 percent of the respondents recommended that the international community should spend aid through the government (Torabi and Delesgues, 2008).

Parallel structures of aid delivery, continue to consume substantial amounts of net aid flows. They also undermine institution building processes as well as the credibility of the Afghan government in providing the basic service delivery. The problem in economic coordination among various actors is evident from the fact that multiple donors operate with their own respective notions of development, political agendas, bureaucratic procedures, and inertia. Huge aid commitments have resulted in little difference to the lives of Afghan people. In another IWA survey in 2010, about 50 percent of respondents said corruption was helping the Taliban expand its influence. (Londoño, 2010) Similarly, an earlier study titled 'Falling Short' by the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) revealed that since the ouster of the Taliban regime in late 2001 the international community has pledged some \$25 billion, out of which only \$15 billion has been delivered. The study highlighted that nearly 40 per cent of the Western funds that are spent on aid projects are returned to the donor countries through fees to contractors and salaries to employees from those countries (Waldman, 2008). This 'phantom aid' (Jones, 2006) or flight of aid capital back to donor countries was the highest with the US funded projects.

Progress in building local capacity has been extremely slow and has been impeded by deeply-entrenched corruption, and patronage networks. Furthermore, donors have not been consistent in their willingness to direct funds to the authorities through the trust fund, and the Afghan Government has criticized the practice of the USA and other donors of implementing programmes independently. At the Kabul Conference of July 2010, donors agreed to allocate more of their aid through the Government but this was almost immediately undermined by allegations, in September, of major fraud at the privately-owned Kabul Bank. This resulted in the IMF suspending negotiations on a new funding programme for Afghanistan, and consequently in donors also being obliged to halt all financial transfers to the Government. However, in November 2011 the IMF approved a new funding programme to support Afghanistan's economic programme during 2011–14.

Unfortunately, the ongoing security transition process also assumes that Afghanistan will remain an aid-dependent state for another decade. The Bonn conference II of December 2011 had set an extended period of international assistance of 2014–24 terming it the transformational decade. The contours of international assistance and engagement remain unclear. While Afghanistan's economic growth is certain to suffer over the next several years, there are concerted efforts to buffer a decline in aid with investments designed to build institutional capabilities. As uncertainty of continued foreign assistance and presence looms, Afghanistan witnessed a dip in real estate and flight of capital and trained personnel in 2013-14.

At a donor meeting in Tokyo, Japan, in July 2012, the international community pledged US \$16,000m. to Afghanistan until 2015 in order to fund the reconstruction of its economy and necessary reforms. However, over the coming years Afghanistan will have to compensate for the certain shrinkage of external support, particularly from the USA, aid that in 2010–11 totaled \$15,700m. At 90% of total public spending, this was virtually the size of Afghanistan's entire GDP. The greatest concern was that the USA and other sources would make abrupt funding cuts over the next three years, rather than gradual, predictable reductions in non-military assistance. However, the full impact on Afghanistan's economic growth, fiscal sustainability and service delivery will probably not be apparent until after 2015.

The way forward: Prospects for Regional Cooperation

Amid drawdown of international forces and the overall narrative of despondency, for Afghanistan there exists a window of opportunity in the transformation decade of achieving peace and stability. Regional cooperation has emerged as an important pillar of Afghan foreign policy and the international community's strategy for the country's long-term development. In December 2002, the 'Kabul Declaration on Good-Neighbourly Relations' sought the commitment of Afghanistan's neighbouring countries to bilateral relations based on the principles of territorial integrity, mutual respect, friendly relations, cooperation and non-interference in each others' internal affairs. Four years later, the 2006 London Conference issued the Afghanistan Compact, which reiterated the international community's commitment to Afghanistan and support to the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS).

Similarly, in November 2011, the Istanbul Conference for Afghanistan: Security and Cooperation in the Heart of Asia provided another agenda for regional co-operation. It placed Afghanistan at its centre and sought to engage countries like Turkey, China, Russia, Pakistan, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia and the former Soviet Central Asian republics, collectively called Heart of Asia, in co-operation for a peaceful and stable Afghanistan. In June 2012, at a follow up meet in Kabul, supporting countries and organisations reaffirmed the commitments enshrined in the 2002 Kabul Declaration and the principles stipulated in the Istanbul Process.

Such grandiose declarations and their reaffirmation, however, remain far from being implemented. Quick fix solutions and the setting of arbitrary time lines for 'exit' have not met with the needs on the ground. This disjuncture runs the inherent danger of reversing the limited gains made as the international community as it hurriedly prepares to disengage. Greater regional integration is imperative if Afghanistan wants to avoid a severe contraction of its economy. As foreign aid and spending declines in the next few years, the Afghan economy will face not just a shortage of aggregate demand but also a more immediate shortage of foreign exchange. Strategically located between countries with surplus energy resources and others with high energy demands, Afghanistan has the potential of capitalising on its status as a land bridge between Central Asia and South Asia. Stability in Afghanistan will be essential for projects like the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) natural gas pipeline. If materialised, project would create jobs inside Afghanistan and will raise US\$ 100–300 million annually from transit fees, nearly doubling Afghanistan's current domestic revenue. Trade, transit and regional connectivity would provide revenue, employment and economic opportunities not only to the people of Afghanistan but also to South and Central Asia.

Despite narratives of pessimism and doom-mongering in the international media, the drawdown of international military forces provides a unique opportunity for Afghanistan to pursue the goal of achieving long-term economic progress and stability through the mechanism of regional cooperation. If this is to materialise, the role and support of regional countries- Pakistan, Iran, China, Russia, India and the Central Asian Republics would be crucial. If the economic benefits of regional cooperation are accompanied by incremental steps in confidence building mechanisms, these will contribute to building long-term peace throughout the region. The promotion of inter-regional trade, transit, connectivity and energy pipelines, by capitalising on Afghanistan's role as a 'land bridge', could thus reap huge economic benefits and peace dividend in the region.

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