

From security transition to civilian power: Supporting Afghan youth after 2014

Summary

In many ways, the security transition of 2014 will be a game-changer for the international engagement with Afghanistan. Fewer ‘boots on the ground’ will mean less political clout when trying to influence the future course of Afghanistan. But it also offers opportunities in terms of disconnecting civilian power from the military approach in which it has been embedded so far. This means the international community can finally turn to making an effort on the civilian front in Afghanistan that is more positive and has greater impact, provided it is willing to commit enough resources after 2014 and is serious about assisting the country beyond the military engagement that has dominated since 2001. The boost to civilian power should focus especially on reaching out to Afghanistan’s next generation: the millions of young men and women who will ultimately determine the long-term effect and sustainability of our international efforts. Beyond 2014, the need for stabilisation will continue in Afghanistan, and investment in Afghan youth could easily prove to be one of the most cost-effective and beneficial actions for future stability.

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Facing the inevitable

The past ten years of the international presence in Afghanistan have shown that there are no short cuts, no quick-fix or silver bullet solutions for the country’s intertwined security and development processes. Unsurprisingly, progress has been slow, despite repeated political promises that things would change rapidly in Afghanistan. Moreover, approaching the crucial moment of the end of the security transition process (2011–14), a chain of tragic incidents has jeopardised the situation to such an extent that there are calls for stepping up the pace of the transition calendar. The US marines urinating on Taliban corpses in January 2012, the burning of the Quran at Bagram airbase in February 2012 and the shooting of 16 innocent civilians by a US sergeant in March 2012 have significantly damaged the image of the international

forces operating in Afghanistan, despite their hard work and good intentions.

In such a negative environment, withdrawing foreign soldiers from Afghanistan increasingly seems an attractive political option, but the ramifications of such a step could be disastrous. The security transition is a political process, unfortunately determined more by domestic political priorities and budget cuts in ISAF-troop contributing countries than by a thorough assessment of the security situation on the ground. At present, the fragile security situation – even aside from the above-mentioned incidents – would normally not allow the withdrawal of any forces from Afghanistan. In fact, the more logical option would be to send in more troops to support the training of the Afghan National Security Forces in

coming years, to maintain a strong military presence while negotiations with the Taliban insurgent groups take place, and to continue improving the positive impact of the foreign military's footprint in the country. This would imply that ISAF could continue to support the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and improve its own effectiveness in theatre while learning from past mistakes and previous operations.

Maintaining foreign forces in Afghanistan is, however, politically impossible. Officially, the security transition calendar is flexible, which means that, in theory, foreign troops could stay in Afghanistan beyond 2014 if the security situation further deteriorated. In reality, most forces will have left by the end of that year, regardless of the unstable state of the country. Recognition that troop withdrawal has become unavoidable prompts us to look at the future of international engagement with Afghanistan beyond the security transition process. At first glance, any such assessment paints a rather gloomy picture of what lies ahead. Without the international community's political commitment, military resources and spending, it is difficult to see how a structural engagement will materialise. In addition, the withdrawal of the military also means that a substantial part of the military and security infrastructure will disappear – infrastructure that directly or indirectly benefits civilian efforts in the country.

An opportunity to disconnect civilian from military power

Notwithstanding the negative scenario outlined above, the 2014 security transition deadline also offers an important window of opportunity. Deploying civilian power outside of the military framework, which has dominated the international engagement since 2001, provides an opportunity to disconnect civilian efforts from the military approach. Up to now, most civilian efforts in Afghanistan have been directly related to the security paradigm. For example, the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are a security construction, of which the development component is an integral part of its military function. Similarly, civil-military cooperation (CIMIC), which responds to the reality that in current conflicts the military is often obliged to engage in non-military activities and interact with the civilian environment, is really a military instrument. Even the broader 'comprehensive approach', in which CIMIC and

PRTs operate together, is often an embodiment of the idea that civilian and military instruments should complement each other to help achieve military objectives.

The strong link between development and security in Afghanistan has often been discredited by representatives of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other civilian actors working in the country, who warn about the 'militarisation' of aid and development efforts. Nevertheless, in many areas of Afghanistan, the military has been either the enabling factor for any development aid to be delivered or even the only actor, directly carrying out small-scale food-aid, development and reconstruction work through the PRTs. Regardless of who is right in this two-sided debate, the foreign military and much of its infrastructure is on the way out, and the international community has to deal with the consequences.

The security transition could in fact prove to be a blessing in disguise. Disconnecting civilian power from the security paradigm means that success or failure is no longer dependent on the proper functioning and impact of military 'boots on the ground'. On the one hand, this can persuade policy-makers to boost civilian power in order to replace the impact of the foreign military's presence, but on the other hand, it might result in civilian-led efforts becoming an empty shell if the civilian approach is not backed by sufficient financial and human resources and commitment from the international community. The latter scenario is a real possibility, as civilian power – whether enhanced or not – is likely to struggle with the titanic task of filling part of the void left by the foreign military apparatus after 2014.

Taking out the foreign military does not only entail withdrawing troops, dismantling military bases and shipping home military equipment; it also means taking out a huge proportion of the Afghan aid economy, which amounts to about 97 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP). In its 'Transition in Afghanistan, looking beyond 2014' presentation of November 2011, the World Bank already warned of a recession in the crucial transition year of 2014 and of serious fiscal gaps (up to US\$ 7 billion or € 5.3 billion) until at least 2021.

The country's youth as a stabilising factor

Despite efforts to improve governance and

institution-building, the international community's short-term military exit strategy depends mainly on two crucial outcomes to developments taking place: the effective training of sufficient Afghan security forces to take over responsibilities in 2014, and a political settlement of the conflict through reaching out to the Taliban insurgent groups. A political settlement is unlikely to be achieved before the end of the transition, especially as some of the conditions of the peace negotiations are strongly dependent on or affected by the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan and the reliance of the Afghan government on foreign assistance. In addition, the outcome of the presidential elections scheduled for 2014 will strongly influence the pace and direction of peace negotiations. The early suspension by the Taliban of the recent peace negotiations in Qatar, and the killing of the Afghan peace negotiator Arsala Rahmani in May 2012, signal that there is still a long way to go.

The other area in which the international community is placing its hopes, the training of the Afghan National Security Forces, is an ongoing process that will not have been completed by 2014 – not even if the target numbers of Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army have been reached. It is as much about quality as it is about quantity. Building up an effective body of security forces is not a 'train and equip' exercise only. It requires institutional and cultural changes as well, i.e., a long-term commitment.

However, the training of the security forces provides an interesting illustration of how the international community is approaching the youth of Afghanistan. The training of mostly young, often illiterate, police and army recruits illustrates the restricted engagement the international community has had so far with Afghan youth. By focusing on the security forces, and by pouring millions of euros into training about 300,000 young men, the much broader group of young Afghans who will become neither police officers nor soldiers in the Afghan army has been neglected. The potentially destabilising effects of disenfranchised youth are known from many other settings, not least in countries affected by the 'Arab Spring'. The biggest similarity between Afghanistan and the Arab countries is their very young populations (around 68 per cent of the Afghan population is under the age of 25). The Taliban insurgent groups, local strongmen and power-

brokers can easily abuse the prevailing instability in Afghanistan and draw large numbers of (uneducated) young men into their local power struggles.

This reality should not be ignored by the international community, but the dominance of the security paradigm during the past ten years has prevented the international community from focusing on the positive role that Afghan youth can play. Therefore, the shift towards more civilian power should be accompanied by a reinforced effort to reach out to Afghanistan's young people and to turn them into an important stabilising factor. There is extensive knowledge on the risks associated with youth who are uneducated or unemployed, but further research is needed into the opportunities and spill-over effects that can be derived from engaging with young people and preventing them from becoming a risk to the stability of Afghanistan.

Targeting youth in the era of social media

So far, the Arab Spring protest movements witnessed in Arab countries have had only indirect consequences for Afghanistan, where it has helped to create some small-scale student activism in Kabul and other cities, centred mainly on the promotion of civil values and the fight against corruption. Internet use is increasing, together with the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter, and online applications such as YouTube are popular. Internet use, however, is still limited mainly to male students in internet cafés and (young) Afghans working in offices. The main sources of news are still television (especially in the cities) and radio; mobile phones are ubiquitous but still rarely used to connect to the internet. Foreign investment is very welcome in further developing the communication technology platforms, their content and use. Social media have huge potential in the country, not only as a window on the world for young Afghans, but also as a way to reach them through cultural diplomacy.

When the security paradigm is discontinued in 2014, youth support programmes will no longer have to be regarded as pure counter-insurgency stratagems (as in offering Afghan youth alternatives to being recruited by insurgent groups). Instead, young people should be supported in a positive way that will turn them into effective agents for social

change and therefore stability in the long run, as their goals and aspirations in life become more aligned with some of the western values the international community is promoting in Afghanistan, albeit in a cultural and religious framework that will remain different. The trend towards greater westernisation (understood here as increased interest in positive assets such as civic participation, democracy, political debate and awareness of human rights, but also popular western culture) has already started; however, it can be further supported and reinforced with targeted cultural diplomacy that goes beyond the classic instruments of educational exchange, and basic cultural and language teaching programmes. One of the clearest signs of progress so far is the growth of political debate in Afghanistan, a development that the international community should reinforce with targeted investments.

Priorities for civilian power after 2014: the views of Afghan youth

In a series of informal, young people's mini-jirgas in Herat, Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif, the author spoke with groups of about six to eight young Afghans (aged 19-35, mostly men, but some women) to gather some initial ideas of what they think should be the international community's priorities after 2014. What follows is a summary of their thoughts and suggestions, included here as a first, modest step towards more research and analysis into priority areas for youth development after the completion of transition. In general, there is a common impression among the young Afghans interviewed that both the Afghan government and the international community have largely neglected Afghanistan's youth. Although they know that some NGOs have been working on development and reconstruction, what they have mostly seen in their cities in the past ten years are armoured convoys with NATO-ISAF soldiers. The ending of the security paradigm may help change that impression if civilian power can effectively make a difference in some of the following issue areas.

Action 1: Promotion of civil society organisations, with the necessary investment in education and training

After 2014, it is essential that the international community use its civilian power to invest heavily in long-term programmes that foster active citizenship and young people's political participation, for example through empowering civil society

organisations (CSOs) run by young Afghans. This will create the necessary platforms for youth to have a voice in the country, to debate issues of political and social change, and inform the political leaders of their views. To make sure they are also being heard, investment in communication technology should be a priority, combined with training on how to best advocate for and communicate their ideas and opinions, and how to connect with the government and the general public. Of course, traditional investment in foreign language and IT courses is useful to accompany this process, especially as there is already a growing demand for these in the urban centres. Increased spending on education and job-related training will also be necessary beyond 2014.

Action 2: Investment in education and entrepreneurship

Most young Afghans consider (higher) education to be a top priority for the international community, as it is considered to be the basis for all other progress. Both students and teachers should be empowered so that they can enhance their own potential and increase the positive impact they can have on Afghan society. More scholarships, better (and faster) internet connections and IT facilities, better professional training for teachers, and schools and universities that are more 'plugged in' to the international academic system, are some of the requirements that were mentioned. Another problem observed in Afghanistan's higher education system is that only about 25 per cent of students taking the university entry exam are accepted, as there are not enough university places around the country. Investment is needed to better reap the benefits of the talent that is available in Afghanistan. There is still very little entrepreneurship to be found among Afghan youth, and there are few possibilities for getting seed funding to set up small and medium businesses.

Action 3: Promotion of new ways of communicating about values

As young Afghans increasingly connect to the internet, the international community should also support the creating of online content that can foster a better understanding of common values, intercultural differences and the motives behind aid and support programmes implemented in Afghanistan. It is important to avoid a one-directional cultural narrative ('from us to them'). Instead, the focus should be on mutual under-

standing and a genuine exchange of cultural assets and information. It is important that information also reaches young Afghans outside of universities and outside of the main urban centres. This could be achieved by, inter alia, supporting the production of more independent current affairs and cultural online content in Dari and Pashtu – initiatives that should not disregard the traditional (and very popular) media of radio and television. Promoting mobile phone technologies is another way of reaching rural youth, especially if these enable them to connect to the internet and to the urban centres.

Action 4: Afghan-to-Afghan communication and social media courses

An interesting idea for ‘Afghan-to-Afghan’ communication was mentioned during one of the informal sessions, consisting of the promotion of contact between Afghans abroad and Afghans at home. Of course such ties exist within (extended) families, but broader communication was deemed necessary to foster international understanding and intercultural exchange. Afghans abroad tend to use social media more extensively, but its use in Afghanistan, though growing, is still limited. The need for blogging, photojournalism and Twitter workshops and courses was stressed repeatedly. This need is greatest in the rural areas, and NGOs should be funded and stimulated to work on such programmes in these areas.

Action 5: Investment in women’s development

Lastly, young women should be an important target group. For example, at present they are less connected to the internet, mainly because of the fact that visiting an internet café is often seen as inappropriate. Creating special areas for women might be a solution that could be supported. In general, young women should be a priority when looking for ways to increase the number of CSOs

and to encourage entrepreneurship and political participation. This is one of the biggest challenges, especially in the more conservative areas such as southern and eastern Afghanistan. But even in Kabul, many Afghans still think that women should not go to university, have a career, or even leave the house. Changing such cultural traditions may take another generation or two, but the international community should do whatever it can to speed up this process.

Conclusion

A serious debate should be started before 2014 on how best to boost civilian power in favour of Afghanistan’s youth. The challenges are enormous, but the military disengagement offers interesting opportunities to do more with humanitarian and development spending, especially if targeted towards young people. Boosting civilian power could help diminish the level of violence in Afghanistan and enhance public awareness of social and political issues. Among the many challenges Afghanistan faces, the biggest could well be a (partial) return to Taliban or similar conservative values after 2014; this would oblige the international community even more urgently to produce a convincing political narrative able to compete with the Taliban’s negative narrative and propaganda. The Taliban’s propaganda is perceived by some of the young people interviewed for this briefing paper as very powerful and persuasive. A positive, political counter-narrative can therefore be convincing and competitive only if it is backed by sufficient civilian power, coupled with enough (financial) resources, and targeted especially at those most in need of a better and more stable future in Afghanistan: Afghan youth.

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