

Transition in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Progress and Risks

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The political risks and instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan are all too apparent. It is unclear that Afghanistan can create a stable central government, and it is unclear that Pakistan's present central government can survive. At the same time, this is only part of the story.

Critical Problems in Security

Afghanistan suffers from critical problems in developing effective security forces, has never had a successful U.S. surge, and is seeing civilian casualties reach new heights and violence steadily spreading throughout the country. While ISAF -- and the U.S. and Afghan governments -- have stopped virtually all meaningful reporting on the recent course of the war, enough data have still emerged to show just how tenuous the security situation is, how uncertain the progress is in Afghan security forces even if the country remains united, and how dangerous current U.S. plans to retain an advisory presence are in ensuring any hope of lasting security and stability.

These data are laid out in detail in *Security Transition in Afghanistan*. They are a grim warning that the U.S. and NATO are repeating many of the mistakes that led to the collapse of Iraqi forces in dealing with the Islamic State and the ARVN forces in fighting North Vietnam. They raise fundamental issues about the integrity and transparency of ISAF and Department of Defense reporting on the current and probable future course of the fighting, and the credibility of current U.S. transition plans.

Far fewer data are available on the overall structure of violence in Pakistan, and there is no way to validate Pakistani claims of military progress in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). It is clear that Pakistan has been unable to make lasting gains in its past fighting and cope with the civil dimensions of such fighting. It is also clear that serious tensions remain between Afghanistan and Pakistan, that the ISI still retains serious ties to the Afghan Taliban and other Afghan insurgents, and that the level of civil violence, ethnic tension, and Islamic extremism in the Punjab and rest of Pakistan present major threats.

The database annex to the U.S. State Department report on Terrorism, and global terrorism database, show a steady and massive rise in the overall number of terrorist incidents in Pakistan from 2004 onwards that rises from under 50 in 2005 to some 2,300 in 2013. The rise in casualties is even sharper. As the country report also shows Pakistan has some of the highest levels of terrorism and internal violence of any country in the world. This will be a critical issue shaping the success of

Transition in Afghanistan given the critical role that Pakistan plays as a trade route, giving the United States and NATO air-sea-land access to Pakistan, and in providing a sanctuary to the Taliban and other Afghan rebels.

Critical Problems in Governance and Economics

The situation is even worse in terms of governance and economics. U.S. government reporting has grossly exaggerated many elements of Afghan success in every aspect of Afghan civil development – including education, economic development, and medical progress. These exaggerations are highlighted in the latest quarterly report of the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR).

Reporting by the World Bank, IMF, and UN provides an even sharper contrast to the claims made by the State Department, USAID, and current Administration. The contrast between such reports is laid out in detail in another CSIS report entitled Governance and Economic Transition in Afghanistan.

It is unclear that the United States has any current assessments and strategy to deal with either these governance or economic issues. If it does, it has provided no transparency as to what these plans are, and has failed to develop any effective public measures of the effectiveness of its civil aid programs after more than 10 years of effort, and in spite of the fact that the civil dimension of counterinsurgency efforts is at least as important as the military efforts.

It is also important to note that World Bank and UN reporting show the same lack of progress in governance, economics, and human development in Pakistan as in Afghanistan. These trends are laid out in graphic form in a new Burke Chair report entitled Pakistan and Afghanistan: International Indicators of Progress. As is the case with Afghanistan, this report highlights a critical lack of progress in many key areas of reporting.

A Time for Serious Analysis and Hard Decisions

The current level of U.S., ISAF-NATO, and allied reporting on the war in Afghanistan – and the closely linked security situation in Pakistan – has striking familiarity to the days when U.S. officials held the “follies” in Vietnam and reported success after success regardless of the realities on the ground. There is a critical lack of overall integrity in virtually every aspect of such reporting, one that disguises a lack of meaningful planning, assessments of future resource and advisory needs, and meaningful measures of progress and effectiveness.

This is one way to leave Afghanistan during 2015-2016, while shifting the burden of what is likely to be all too messy an outcome to the Afghan government and letting the U.S. role in Pakistan phase

down to minimal levels. It may not be the equivalent of declaring victory and leaving, but it is a way of quietly sneaking out the back door.

The question that needs to be asked is whether this is really the strategy the United States should pursue. The current level of problems and challenges in what is an area of marginal strategic interest to the United States may justify such an approach. The United States has comparatively little to lose since most of the world already discounts the Afghan conflict as a war that the United States and NATO have effectively lost – at least in terms of a broader regional defeat of the threat of terrorism and transforming Afghanistan along the grossly overambitious lines set forth in the Afghan Compact.

At the same time, the marginal cost of providing enough resources and advisors to give the Afghan forces a credible chance of success does seem affordable if a stable Afghan government emerges. Similarly, keeping the Afghan economy working as Afghanistan's economy adapts to massive cuts in military spending and aid may also be affordable if the United States and other donors focus on the right priorities rather than unrealistic goals for quick development and the transformation of Afghanistan.

There is also something repellent about sneaking out the back door rather than making an honest and objective assessment of the situation, and making clear decisions about whether a serious and properly planned Transition effort is justified. Hard choices may be hard choices, but they are the choices America should make and make openly and honestly.

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