

Future Prospects for Afghanistan Meeting Report

About this report

Canadian and Afghan area specialists from humanitarian agencies and academia, as well as former and current government officials met in Ottawa on April 14, 2014 to explore the short- to medium-term prospects for Afghanistan. The off-the-record, information-sharing roundtable was co-sponsored by the University of Ottawa's Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS), Peacebuild – The Canadian Peacebuilding Network, and participants in the Afghanistan: Pathways to Peace initiative. Participants explored perspectives on development and security issues, political developments, what is or isn't taking place in terms of a peace process, and possible options for future Canadian engagement, now that Canada's military training mission in Afghanistan has come to an end. To encourage candour, the roundtable was held under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution of contributors. The following report, prepared by Emmanuel Seitelbach and David Lord, sets out the key observations of participants based on the broader discussion of current peace and conflict trends.

Key observations

Afghanistan's presidential election process, still underway at the time of writing, has been a surprising success in many ways, according to several roundtable participants, particularly the large and enthusiastic turnout in many parts of the country, despite pre-election and election-day attacks apparently aimed at discouraging voters and intimidating election workers and political party officials.

Whoever of the frontrunners emerges as the next president, former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah or former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, no radical break is foreseen with the political legacy of outgoing President Hamid Karzai or with Afghanistan's ethnic and patrimonial politics.

As Afghanistan enters a new political era, substantial development progress is evident in the health, education, and infrastructure sectors, as well as in sub-national governance. But the institutional and attitudinal underpinnings of a modern, democratic state are not yet embedded in Afghan politics and

society. Modern Afghanistan remains overshadowed by the traditional tribal Afghanistan and its power-broking dynamics.

To successfully govern, a new president must find ways to engage representatives of the Pashtun south. To do that, he will need to work through his networks, alliances and perhaps a coalition arrangement to bring together the north and south of the country.

The next government in place will face serious challenges of forging some unity within a complex tribal structure while coping with a sharp reduction in international assistance and a resilient insurgency. The successful elections, along with hoped for greater government transparency and good performance, will contribute to legitimizing the new government. One optimistic view is that Afghanistan's "baby democracy" is on its feet, but will need further international help to be able to eventually walk independently.

Peace and peace negotiations were marginal themes during the election campaign, although the popular desire for peace amongst most Afghans after more than three decades of war is seen to be widespread and strong. But the prospects of seeing Karzai's frustrated efforts at peacemaking with insurgents rebooted after the elections are clouded by a range of factors, amongst them the Taliban's apparent willingness to undermine talks about talks, Pakistani covert support and sanctuary for Afghan insurgents, presidential frontrunner Abdullah's hard-line on entering negotiations, the lack, so far, of a substantial Afghan peace movement or the necessary international pressure for the establishment of a comprehensive peace process.

Unofficial, Canadian-led, regional dialogue processes involving influential Afghan, Pakistani and Indian political figures – former foreign ministers, senior civil servants, military and intelligence service leaders – show signs of some progress towards greater mutual understanding of intertwined interests regionally and bilaterally. However, while the ideas they have generated have made it to senior levels in the respective governments, there is currently no official platform for negotiation involving Afghan, Pakistani or Indian decision-makers or, for that matter, an internationally sanctioned and supported Afghan peace process with real traction.

Meanwhile, the continuing deterioration in the security environment, particularly in the south and east of the country, uncertainty about the capacities of Afghan security forces to resist the insurgency with or without American and other international support, as well as the scaling back of the international assistance effort are all seen as potentially endangering gains and opportunities for further development and peace.

Although Prime Minister Stephen Harper has made clear that Canada will not be contributing to a planned NATO training, advice and support mission for Afghan security forces that is to come on-stream in 2015, substantial Canadian funding will be available into 2017 to finance the Afghan police and military forces as well as development programming.

For the Government of Canada, supporting civil society empowerment should remain a priority, particularly protecting and expanding women's rights and good governance at all levels, as part of a clearer, more coherent articulation of Canada's current development and security support objectives.

Canada and other members of the donor community need to look beyond the current social and economic symptoms of the largely dysfunctional Afghan state, including its inability to lead development processes, and invest in approaches that will foster long-term political change and greater effectiveness. As part of such an effort, Canada can provide useful cross-cutting capacity building in areas such as support for civil society, political party development, protection of women's rights, peacebuilding and implementation of the decentralization process that is needed to better deliver health, education and other services.

Peace and stability within Afghanistan and between Afghanistan and its neighbours being in Canada's best national and international interests, it is past-time to rigorously assess and think through the potential for increased use of Canadian governmental and non-governmental expertise and capacities to provide substantial support for a renewed Afghan peace process and regional and international dialogue.

The discussion

Some development trends

As Afghanistan enters a new political era, substantial development progress is evident in the health, education, and infrastructure sectors, as well as in sub-national governance, despite insecurity and other obstacles.

The most successful internationally-supported development programs have been in the health and education sectors implemented through the National Solidarity Program and the National Area-Based Development Program. Since 2002, when less than 30% of Afghans had access to primary healthcare coverage, coverage is now available to 90%. In the same period, the percentage of health facilities with at least one female health worker increased from 20% to 90%. In education, primary school enrolment has risen from 1 million in 2001 to more than 8

million now, the number of schools from 3,000 to around 14,000, and the number of teachers' training schools from 30 to more than 120. These are positive examples of development despite insecurity and other challenges.

A worsening of the general security situation, most recently in the pre-election period, has had a direct impact on humanitarian activity and sustainable development. Generally speaking, insecurity manifests itself in the North along highways and in the South with insurgents controlling entire areas. Violence or the constant threat of violence increases development programs' operational costs, logistical costs, and the retention of staff, particularly female staff. Humanitarian and development agencies committed to staying in the field mitigate security risks. For example, allowing communities to lead projects and build on their own successes is seen to promote the acceptance of foreign aid, the legitimacy of national and more local governance institutions and to contribute to the development of human capacity. NGOs involved in governance, civil society support, strengthening of institutions, health, education, market development, and infrastructure development, such as the Aga Khan Foundation, have been successful in building schools, clinics, roads, and micro-hydropower projects fostering capacity building, project ownership, gender mainstreaming. To address gender issues, women's committees have been established within Community Development Councils and within most, but not all, District Development Assemblies. Aid workers provide gender responsive development training. During the past two years, the District Assemblies have been successfully involved in promoting schoolgirls' enrolment, effectively doubling it. These types of local, district and provincial-level programs have helped build initial trust and working relationships between community representatives and local district, provincial and national institutions and officials, the latter often benefiting from joint training for planning, community resource mapping and supervision of projects. In some instances, participants in these sub-national institutions have been able to pushback against undue influence from local power brokers and former warlords trying to become members or promote their particular economic interests. In other situations, NGO workers have been shielded from insurgent violence by local people successfully arguing that they are benefiting the community.

Governance and nation-building

At the national level, the model that the international community adopted for Afghanistan's nation-building effort has been based on the idea of an ethnic, power-sharing democracy, similar to the Lebanese model, which has rarely been successful. In the view of some, Afghanistan's electoral law, political parties' law, legal system and constitution all are in need of reform. On a day-to-day basis, the Afghan parliament experiences functional difficulties, while corrupt practices often involve the politically connected obtaining development project

contracts. Underlying the problems of institutionalizing democratic processes and attitudes is that Afghanistan's transition from a society at war and ruled by ethnic leaders to one ostensibly led by elected politicians has happened without resolution of the ethnic and other divisions within the country. Among the presidential candidates are factional leaders who were fighting each other ten years ago. Some militias, including jihadi groups that derive their support and legitimacy from ethnic votes, have taken on the trappings of political parties without proper disarmament.

The sustainability of Afghanistan's new institutions — the central bureaucracy, parliament, elections, military, police — is at risk with reduced foreign assistance. Beyond government institutions, the departure of thousands of foreign soldiers and civilians will be detrimental to the largely foreign-aid-driven economy. Armies of translators, drivers, laundry staff, cooks, and trades employees will lose their jobs.

Civil society groups in Afghanistan have developed rapidly into modern organizations providing services on a cooperative bases, but are aid dependent and largely limited to urban centers due to rural insecurity. The prospect of long-term programming (over decades) is clouded by short-term and changeable foreign donors' commitments, with many organizations now being forced to think and act in 18-month or two-year timeframes. But as one roundtable participant pointed out, her NGO's efforts to foster women's empowerment through education required 10 years of dialogue with deeply-conservative traditional religious leaders to move ahead. In the current uncertain circumstances, NGO workers are bluntly telling their beneficiaries they have 18-weeks of funding with cautious hope that there may be more in the future.

Women

Protecting women's rights requires peace. A campaign headed by women advisors and civil society calling for peace collected 200,000 signatures across the country, showing women's determination.

The international community has started implanting ideas around women's economic empowerment in the private and public spheres, participation in the control of resources, in the North and other rural communities. Long-term economic growth depends on women's participation. Canada can support NGOs efforts in the creation of for-profit entities.

Canadian engagement

Despite the recent termination of its military training mission, the Government of Canada has made major commitments to 2017: \$110 million for support of Afghan security forces and \$227

for development programs related to “the advancement of Afghan women and girls [...] in education, maternal, newborn and child health, and the rights and empowerment of women and girls; advancing security, democracy, rule-of-law and human rights; and contributing to [...] capacity development for the management of humanitarian assistance.”¹ Canada still has a strong development team at the Embassy in Kabul but faces challenges for the delivery and monitoring of programming. Regarding discussions of longer-term assistance, a donors’ ministerial meeting is planned for 2015.

The presidential elections and their implications

Seven million of about 12 million potential voters, 35% of them women, cast ballots, which is extremely encouraging. Canada invested a lot to encourage women voters and the process is still going on. Successful elections and the high turn-out of a population concerned for a better future of Afghanistan are a strong message to the world and opposition groups within Afghanistan that the population opposes the Taliban and is adopting the democratic process. A 58% turnout with all of Afghanistan’s obstacles to electoral participation is comparable to Canada’s 61% federal election voter turnout in 2011.

For one participant in the roundtable the election results reveal the duality of Afghanistan. One Afghanistan is a modern, increasingly urbanized society, with a young population who largely reject the Taliban. The other is largely rural, rooted in ethnicity and tribal arrangements, and where ethnic powerbrokers still dominate local and national politics.

Many Pashtuns from the South did not vote. The complex network of tribal influencers in the South may accept or reject the electoral outcome. The victor is expected to continue to look to Hamid Karzai, a southern Pashtun, and seek to benefit from his political skills. The victor is also expected to engage with civil society groups in a national dialogue. All candidates have rejected violence as an option to solve political issues.

The next government in place will face serious challenges such as reduced international assistance. The elected president must unite a country with a complex tribal structure, including the southern Pashtuns. Promoting human rights and democracy must be more than rhetoric. Successful elections along with the prospect of government transparency and good performance will contribute to legitimizing the new government.

¹ <http://www.international.gc.ca/afghanistan/index.aspx?lang=eng>

During the campaign, national policies and programs regarding security, economics, and education were barely revealed. Political figures lacking genuine political parties relied on their networks rather than political platforms to win support.

Several also-rans are bargaining over the formation of alliances or government coalitions with the two remaining candidates: Abdullah Abdullah and Ashraf Ghani. The tribal affiliation of leading candidates will affect their relationship with the opposition. Abdullah is seen as a Tajik, while Ghani is an eastern Pashtun, with limited support in the Pashtun south.

The Independent Electoral Complaint Commission (IECC) will examine the credibility of complaints from 24 April to 14 May. By May 14, final results are expected to be available. The scale of alleged fraud and how candidates respond to the allegations will have to be assessed. The IECC needs to decide whether the results are acceptable taking into account the evidence, the level of contestation and the dangers of destabilization.

The elections and peace

During the election campaign, the three leading candidates -- Abdullah, Ghani and Zalmi Rassoul -- addressed the issues of peace, reconciliation and political reforms in general terms only, choosing instead to underscore the economy, security, employment and relations with Pakistan.

Abdullah has insisted the Taliban accept the Afghan Constitution or face continued fighting. Rassoul, seen by some as a Karzai favourite, and Ghani, have expressed willingness to accommodate Taliban leaders in government positions. Ghani has also shown support for involving the international community and the United Nations (UN) in a peace process and in pressuring Pakistan to bring the Taliban under control within its Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA).

Some see a peace process and negotiations with the Taliban as continuing for decades. In the short-term, a newly-elected president will have a high degree of political legitimacy and increased negotiating power. At the same time, the evidence supporting the view that the Taliban might be willing to enter a meaningful peace process "is not very strong," one participant noted. For the Taliban, it is also a very complicated process to maintain their strength while entering negotiations. One critical problem is the opposition of hardline jihadists to any negotiation with foreign interlocutors, such as the U.S. or United Nations representatives.

Further clouding the prospects for negotiation is the belief that insurgents are eager to test how Afghan national security forces can hold out into 2015, when most foreign forces will have been withdrawn. Canada and others have been training Afghan military and police forces since 2006, not without challenges. Gains are evident in capacities and readiness of security forces to carry out their functions, but weaknesses also remain. One fear is that when the final election outcome sinks in, political and ethnic conflicts could be exacerbated and accompanied by fragmentation and realignments of members of national security forces.

Prior to the election, President Karzai balked at signing a Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States that would allow U.S. troops to stay beyond 2014, but the three leading candidates for presidency all expressed their willingness to sign the BSA once elected. What has been under discussion between Washington and Kabul is a residual force of about 10,000 remaining in Afghanistan to provide support for Afghan security forces.² Prime Minister Harper has indicated Canada will not contribute troops. (There are currently about 51,000 foreign troops in Afghanistan in the International Security Assistance Force, 33,000 of them American.)

An Afghan-led peace process

Since 2005, U.S. led counter-insurgency efforts have taken precedence over development of an Afghan-led comprehensive peace process – in effect, a national dialogue process that would allow inclusive participation of all major conflict actors and robust civil society involvement.³ In 2011, the International Crisis Group, as well as diplomats Lakhdar Brahimi and Thomas Pickering, advocated for a regional negotiation framework⁴ backed by the UN Security Council, with impartial third-party mediation backed up by UN expertise.

What has taken place instead have been opaque encounters between Afghan, Pakistani and other political elites that have been stained by assassination and disappearances of participants, while no ISAF country or member of the UN Security Council has expressed interest in backing a more effective dialogue process. Meanwhile, the once-promising *Istanbul Process on Regional Security for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan*, launched in 2011, which brings together all the regional actors and others, is, at best, making painfully slow progress in

² <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/04/21/us-usa-afghanistan-idUSBREA3K1DS20140421>

³ The latest [Accord issue](#) from Conciliation Resources notes statistical evidence of the importance of civil society involvement in peace processes on sustainability of agreements. *Accord*, Issue 25, p. 30

⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/23/opinion/23brahimi.html?_r=0

identifying potential confidence-building measures to promote energy security and regional stability.

According to one roundtable participant, what is needed is for a new Afghan government to respond to positive popular support for a genuine negotiation process, not one hijacked by interest groups trying to impose outcomes without reconciling outstanding differences. All parties at the regional level are pushing their own agenda, in an atmosphere of profound mistrust.

A disinterested third-party facilitator acceptable to all parties and acting within a dialogue framework supported by the UN is initially needed to make the case for any peace process not being a zero-sum game with negative results to be imposed on some conflict parties or the Afghan population.

Track 2 efforts

Unofficial, Canadian-led, regional dialogue processes involving influential Afghan, Pakistani and Indian political figures – former foreign ministers, senior civil servants, military and intelligence service leaders – show signs of some progress towards greater mutual understanding of intertwined interests regionally and bilaterally.

However, while these ideas have penetrated official levels in the three countries, there is currently no official platform for negotiation involving Afghan, Pakistani or Indian decision-makers or, for that matter, an internationally sanctioned and supported Afghan peace process.

Multilateral reconciliation is complex. In this case, some see the need for several reconciliation processes -- between India and Pakistan, between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and between the Northern Alliance and the Pashtuns.

The Taliban structure, which spans several countries, is also complex with 40 groups within Pakistan, sometimes qualified as “virtual Taliban” because most people have never met a Taliban member, but have witnessed drug smuggling or weapons trading sometimes attributed to the Taliban. Pakistani Taliban are present throughout Pakistani society, with a *madrassa* network, mosque network, sanctuaries, and bomb-making facilities and are recognized as being active in eastern and southern Afghanistan. One roundtable participant said that a Taliban shadow government has infiltrated the national and regional government levels of Pakistan.

In Track 2 discussions, some Pakistani participants acknowledge that their country's meddling in Afghanistan has provided its own sworn enemies of the Pakistani state space to operate from within Afghanistan – in military terms providing “strategic depth” for the Pakistani Taliban. Senior Pakistani government officials admit they have created a tiger that they can't control out of concern for what is seen as Indian encirclement of Pakistan and the emergence of a strong Afghanistan.

Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's ability to foster domestic and regional peace efforts is considered to be limited by his personal style and political power. Although Sharif favours dialogue with India and with Pakistan's domestic Taliban insurgency, perceptions are that Pakistan's security institutions will only allow him to talk but will flatly reject any concessions.

Pakistani intelligence officers recall India's intervention in the splitting of Bangladesh from Pakistan in 1971 and now allege Indian involvement in support of Pashtun and Baluch separatists, accusations denied by India, but that are perceived as existential threats to the Pakistani state.

Some retired senior Pakistani officials fear that with all its political and economic problems, including the range of cross-border issues with Afghanistan, India and Iran, Pakistan is on course to become a failed state. In terms of regional and international security, the disintegration of Pakistan, with a 185 million strong population, a large military establishment, the potential for large-scale proliferation of small arms and other conventional weapons, and a vulnerable nuclear arsenal would be a disaster.

As part of the regional dialogue process participants have made progress in “agreeing on what they disagree on” and are now engaging in articulating what each parties' basic national interests are seen to be. There has already been recognition that India has “strategic interests” in Afghanistan while Pakistan has “vital interests” there. For the Afghans, there appears to be recognition that some level of interference from their neighbours is inevitable but that something can be done to assert Afghan control by negotiating and applying some “rules of the game.”

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