

Commentaries

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Afghanistan and Its Future*

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The Afghan people, and particularly the younger generation, want to leave the past behind them and look to the future. But for Afghanistan, any vision of a viable future depends on the achievement of security, peace and stability after 2014. In this regard, there are a number of critical steps that have yet to be taken.

Afghanistan was established as an independent state in 1748. But given its location along routes frequently used as thoroughfares for various waves of migration, it repeatedly faced occupation. In the 19th century in particular, it became a virtual buffer zone between the Russians to the north and the British Empire to the south. But it was in the 20th century that Afghanistan experienced its greatest national tragedies. In the 28 years between the military coup of 1973 and the international intervention in 2001, the country underwent coups, internal conflicts, struggles for power, and Soviet occupation. As a result, the country's infrastructure, institutions and establishments all collapsed.

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The Afghan people suffered greatly; during this period nearly 1.5 million Afghans perished and a further six million migrated to other countries, chiefly Pakistan and Iran.

In 1989, after a decade of war and occupation, the Soviet Union withdrew from Afghanistan under the terms of an agreement. But then the *mujahideen*, who had formerly collaborated to fight the Soviets as a unified force turned against one another in a brutal struggle for power. International public opinion, particularly in the Western world, remained indifferent, essentially abandoning the country to its fate. Then in 1994, the Taliban, taking advantage of the weakened authority, internal struggles and the atmosphere of insecurity, gradually rolled out a government from Kandahar. By 1996 it had brought the entire country under its power. The Soviet withdrawal had not just resulted in the rise of the Taliban; Afghanistan became a virtual free zone for various terrorists and their training camps, religious radicals, jihadists, drugs, and organized crime. Afghanistan remained out of the international spotlight until the 2001 attacks on the Twin Towers and the Pentagon.

Afghanistan and 9/11

September 11th 2001 marked a new era for Afghanistan. Once the attacks were attributed to the Afghanistan-based terrorist organisation al-Qaeda, a U.S.-led coalition acting on a UN

Security Council resolution staged a military intervention in the country. This military intervention removed the Taliban from government and destroyed the terrorist camps. In addition to the U.S.-led invasion force, the International Security and Aid Force (ISAF) was created by another UN Security Council Resolution, tasked with providing security, initially in Kabul and throughout virtually the entire country.

9/11 can be considered a milestone not only for Afghanistan, but also for NATO, marking the first application of Article Five of the Washington Agreement in the organization's history. The day after the 9/11 attacks, the North Atlantic Council met and agreed that 9/11 had activated the conditions of Article Five, which provides for collective self-defence action in the face of an armed attack. Thus, NATO members were called to contribute to ISAF. In line with the resolution and the call, Turkey too sent troops to Afghanistan and assumed ISAF command from 2003 onwards.

The twelve-year process and beyond

Twelve years have passed since the creation of the U.S.-led coalition and the NATO intervention. During this period, states and international organisations and institutions have given their support to Afghanistan. They have contributed to building peace, security, and stability, and to the reso-

lution of the country's socio-economic problems. Successes have been observed in a good many areas, but no lasting solution has been found to the problem of terror. Peace, security, and stability have not been achieved.

A long-term solution to Afghanistan's security issues requires the creation of a national security force (i.e. an army and police force). This issue has been a priority during the 12-year conflict, and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), which has nearly 352,000 members, is now capable of assuming responsibility. Regardless of the significance of this advance, it remains the case that there are still significant deficiencies and problems regarding military and police training, vehicles, and equipment.

During this period, there have been important developments in the field of education. For example the number of students in primary level education has reached eight million. But more importantly, a significant number of these are girls, who previously were prevented from going to school by the Taliban. There have also been important investments and major progress in the areas of health, transportation, electricity, water, and other infrastructural spheres. Nearly five million refugees have returned to Afghanistan. A constitution has been drafted and presidential elections have been held for the first time in Afghanistan's history. But despite all these developments,

the priority for Kabul remains the as yet unresolved problems of terrorism and security. Cutting against this is the issue that Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest countries, has not received sufficient international aid to boost the economy.

The international forces, the U.S. and NATO, will leave the country in 2014. This year will be a vital and critical one for Afghanistan's future. The country's security problems will be inherited by the ANSF, and the post-2014 NATO and American military presence will only provide back-up, training, and consultative functions. After 2015, the plan is for ISAF to be replaced by "Resolute Support", a new non-combat NATO mission to provide training, back-up, and consultancy. The bilateral security agreements between the U.S. and Afghanistan stipulate that a combat force of around 10,000 will be stationed there alongside the training and consultative mission.

Further, 2014 will also be important for Afghanistan because presidential elections are scheduled to take place. According to the Constitution, Hamid Karzai cannot run for a third term and consequently a new president must be elected. It will not be easy to find a candidate who can secure a broad consensus; already 17 applicants for candidacy. Karzai's support will therefore be decisive in selecting a new president. The same year will witness the Provincial Council

election, which are similar to local government elections. Given the previous election experience, it is likely that these elections will be conducted peacefully.

To conclude, ensuring peace and stability in Afghanistan after 2014 requires decisions to be made and steps to be taken on certain critical matters.

(1) In terms of economic and social indicators, Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries in the world. In recent years, it has struggled with inadequate foreign aid. Furthermore, when the U.S. prioritized Iraq, it tried to solve the Afghanistan problem with too few soldiers and too little economic assistance. From now on it will be necessary to consider the socio-economic conditions in Afghanistan and guarantee continued economic aid for many years to come;

(2) Along with training, Afghanistan's security forces should be provided with equipment, vehicles, and supplies;

(3) It is plain that lasting solutions to the problem of terror cannot be achieved through military measures alone. Political measures are also required. Thus a compromise within a framework of clear principles must be reached with the Taliban. The peace process needs to be accelerated, with Afghanistan taking responsibility and providing the lead;

(4) Regional cooperation, and in par-

ticular cooperation with neighbouring countries and Pakistan, is extremely important in order to achieve security and stability in Afghanistan.

If these measures are taken, it will be possible for Afghanistan and the Afghan people, who have lived under the shadow of war, foreign occupation, and instability since 1973, to attain peace and stability. Afghans, and particularly the new generation of young people are committed to building a future. For this reason Afghanistan, the Afghan people, and in particular Afghan women need international support, solidarity, and assistance more than ever before.