

Afghanistan: Transition and Partnership*

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Resumo

Afeganistão: Transição e Parceria

Os pontos de viragem raramente são aparentes à época, por mais inevitáveis que eles possam parecer aos historiadores. Desconhece-se se o ponto de viragem no Afeganistão já passou, mas o progresso efectuado em 2010 e 2011 deu-nos a oportunidade de persistir neste esforço e levá-lo a bom termo. Ainda que exista um longo e árduo caminho a percorrer, se continuarmos determinados esse caminho conduzirá a um Afeganistão mais estável e a um mundo mais seguro objectivos pelos quais muitos sacrificaram tanto.

Abstract

Turning points are rarely apparent at the time, however inevitable they seem to historians. It is unknown whether the turning point in Afghanistan has passed, but the progress made in 2010 into 2011 has provided the opportunity to see this effort through to a successful conclusion. While there will still be a long hard road ahead, by remaining resolute, that road will lead to the stable Afghanistan and safer world for which so many have sacrificed so much.

* This article is based on a speech made by the author to the Asia Society in New York in March 2011.

Regaining the Initiative

2009 was a tough year. Security, which we had seen worsen over several years, continued to deteriorate. The insurgents gained momentum, deepened their grip in the south and east and spread into the north and west. They regenerated during the winter months in their sanctuaries in the lawless border areas of Pakistan. Governance had stalled. The controversial 2009 presidential election was internally divisive and damaged trust between the international community and the Afghan political leadership.

The Commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) at the time, General Stanley McChrystal, described the situation in his major review as “serious and deteriorating” and warned of campaign failure. Public support across the Alliance was eroding fast. Despite a doubling of US forces, President Obama’s West Point speech in December 2009 was widely interpreted as signaling for the exit, beginning in the summer of 2011. Several Alliance leaders were pressing publicly for reconciliation with moderate *Taliban* as an alternative to – rather than a component of – a successful campaign. It was clear that 2010 was not only going to be a pivotal year, but the last opportunity to re-boot the campaign.

Security

The effort to regain the initiative started in central Helmand in March 2010, when the military surge was just beginning. Operation Moshtarak or “Together” in Dari – the first truly partnered major offensive – led to the genuinely iconic moment of liberating the derelict town of Marjah. *Taliban* control of this town was so complete that their flag was flying over the district centre. The people were traumatized, not so much by the repressive but orderly *Taliban*, but rather by years of suffering under a brutal and predatory police force led by local tribal warlords, who ran the drugs trade and could buy influence in Kabul. At a *shura* meeting with President Karzai a few weeks after the initial clearing operation, the people warned that they would take up arms and invite the *Taliban* back if that police force returned. It was a pivotal moment. As President Karzai said afterwards, in areas like Marjah, people preferred the *Taliban* to his government and regarded him as a puppet: a point he was to repeat publicly and which has affected his political outlook since.

By March 2011, Marjah had been transformed: a bustling market, a proper road, street lights, schools and clinics opening, wheat rather than poppy in the fields, a

newly elected district council and a locally recruited police force within the formal institution of the Afghan security forces. People in the market explained that, while they appreciated schools, clinics and roads, their allegiance was determined by the core functions of the state: security and the rule of law provided by accountable institutions; this is a crucial lesson.

When General David Petraeus took over as COMISAF in the summer of 2011, the campaign moved to Kandahar. The insurgents were cleared from the key districts to the west of the city – the birthplace of Mullah Omar and thus the cradle of the *Taliban*. Kandahar is critical: as most Afghans will tell you, if you hold Kandahar and Kabul, you hold Afghanistan. Kabul was calm throughout 2010, primarily because of the intense tempo of intelligence-led and partnered Special Forces operations against the networks which target the capital: notably the *Haqqanis* from their base in North Waziristan. Elsewhere, the insurgency's momentum was halted.

For the first time, Afghan security forces outnumbered international forces in the Kandahar operations. They truly led much of the fighting, for which the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan (NTM-A) deserves real credit. In NTM-A's first year, the Afghan security forces exceeded their growth targets. Additionally, NTM-A implemented new programmes to raise quality and institutional capability and sharply improved training effectiveness.

However, progress was not just due to bigger and better Afghan and international forces. In Gizab district, on the borders of Daykundi and Uruzgan provinces, the locals expelled the *Taliban* and kept them out with help from the village stability teams run by US Special Forces – small groups of soldiers who live and operate among the people. This was perhaps the best example of one of the most important innovations of 2010: the Afghan Local Police, or ALP. For the same reason that it took months of effort to gain the people's confidence in Marjah, in the contested rural areas, Afghans want to be secured by locals and policed by outsiders. And initiatives like this pass the most important test: they are Afghan-authentic. As Lawrence of Arabia said a century ago: "It is their country, their way and our time is short".

This impressive progress came at a high cost. 2010 was the bloodiest year for the Alliance and for Afghan civilians. Several thousand Afghan civilians were killed, most by the indiscriminate violence of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) laid by the insurgents. Roadside bombs particularly threatened children. For its part, ISAF stepped up its efforts to avoid ISAF-caused civilian casualties. For ISAF, one civilian casualty is one too many. Despite doubling the number of forces and the operational tempo, the United Nations recorded that ISAF had reduced ISAF-caused civilian casualties by a quarter. The effort continues.

Governance and Development

Although inevitably the focus is on security, most Afghans are also preoccupied with poverty. Infant mortality is staggering: one in five children die before their fifth birthday, not through violence, but because of bad water and bad air. Diarrheal diseases are responsible for almost a third of Afghan infant deaths and respiratory diseases for over a quarter. Despite dramatic improvements in access to healthcare and education, Afghanistan is unfortunately likely to remain a poor and underdeveloped country for many years to come. However, if in 2015, the international community is talking not about violence, security and troop numbers, but about poverty, healthcare and development, then it will finally be talking about the issues which affect most Afghans the majority of the time.

Governance remains just as challenging. Afghanistan is lodged at the bottom of the Transparency International corruption perceptions index; civil service capability is weak, the rule of law is absent or predatory in many areas, many district posts are vacant and half the district governors lack offices, transport, facilities or staff. There have been improvements, however: several of the key ministers have made progress against corruption and in building administrative capacity. Notably, cleaning up the notorious customs service has also strengthened government revenues.

President Karzai has dissolved private security companies associated with members of the government or their families. Raising police salaries above subsistence levels has helped combat corruption. The economic highlight of 2010 was the unearthing of Afghanistan's extraordinary and diverse mineral wealth. While the opportunities are obvious, the risks mustn't be ignored: without effective efforts to forestall corruption, this too could become a source of conflict. Fortunately, one of the most effective ministers is in charge of this portfolio.

Arguably, 2010's worst moment was the Kabul Bank crisis which brought the Afghan financial system to the brink of collapse. Afghanistan's largest bank handles the salaries of most Afghan public servants, including the security forces. In effect, the bank had been turned into a pyramid scheme at the expense of the millions of small depositors who had entrusted it with their savings.

The International Monetary Fund has demanded a credible plan to recover assets and restructure the bank in order to approve the next IMF programme, which itself is necessary for other multilateral and bilateral donors to continue funding the Afghan government. This is vital to maintain progress in the counterinsurgency campaign and transition, and to have any prospect of reaching the London and Kabul Conference targets for delivering 50 percent of foreign aid through Afghan government systems and aligning 80 percent of it with their priority programmes.

Transition and Partnership

Exerting sovereign authority is central to President Karzai's political agenda. On occasion, his outbursts of frustration with the international community, coupled with nationalistic comments, have caused international publics to question the sacrifices for a seemingly unwilling partner.

While many diplomats prefer disagreements to be handled in private, everyone has their own politics. As one senior Afghan official said, any close but somewhat adolescent relationship involves shouting.

The partnership survives these ups and downs because of a common strategic goal: an Afghanistan which can secure and govern itself. The main diplomatic focus in 2010 was to work towards achieving that goal through transition and partnership. At the Lisbon Summit, the Alliance agreed to transition the lead responsibility for security country-wide to the Afghans by the end of 2014. In March 2010, to mark the Afghan New Year, in a speech to the National Military Academy's graduation ceremony (Afghanistan's West Point), President Karzai announced the first seven areas which will start the transition process. These areas cover 20-25 per cent of the population and all four points of the compass, reflecting the regional and ethnic balance of Afghanistan. Transition has been designed to be an irreversible, conditions-based process, through which responsibility is gradually handed to the Afghan security forces as their capabilities grow, underpinned by adequate Afghan-led development and governance, notably (remember Marjah) the rule of law.

For several years, governance had flat-lined because the incentives weren't right. For years, in the absence of Afghan capability, the international community delivered public services through a variety of what President Karzai describes as "parallel structures". This created an unhealthy dependency trap and what some analysts describe as the "rentier state", where Afghan governance focuses on deploying patronage.

Transition shifts the incentives as Afghan civil governance gets off the "welfare" of letting the international community deliver services for them and onto the "work" of delivering services themselves - enabled by international technical assistance.

To be irreversible, transition also needs long-term commitment. NATO's long-term commitment was formalized through the Enduring Partnership signed at the Lisbon Summit. The story of Lisbon was therefore the commitment beyond 2014 to underwrite what the Afghan Defence Minister, General Wardak, calls Afghanistan's "journey to self-reliance", through long-term training, technical assistance and funding for both civil governance and security forces. Once mature, the Afghan

security forces' recurrent costs will be US\$ 6-8 billion a year. The Afghans won't be able to fund that themselves until the mid-2020s even as their mineral resources come on stream. Afghanistan will likely still be among the world's poorest countries, therefore it is understood that the international community will have to stay invested for a decade or more.

Other bilateral agreements too will follow, notably the US-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership.

Reconciliation and Regional Stability

The international community's long-term commitment to underwrite an Afghanistan able to secure and govern itself is a strategic political fact which some within Afghanistan and across the region have yet to appreciate. One of the *Taliban's* best sound bites is "While you have the watches, we have the time". If they still believe it, they are in for an unpleasant surprise, but they certainly used to have a point. With the international coalition endlessly and publicly debating transition - "not an exit strategy" - and reconciliation - "not an exit strategy" - not only the *Taliban*, but most Afghans and all their neighbors believed that the international community would lose patience and leave an unstable Afghanistan. The consequences of this would likely then be handled according to their national, ethnic or factional interests. Unsurprisingly, they re-insured against that contingency and in doing so made it all the more likely. The *Great Game* was back on.

However, the transition programme and the enduring partnerships founded on a solid platform of operational progress have established a new political landscape. Many Afghans and their neighbors are beginning to recognize this, although there are, inevitably, forces of reaction who haven't or won't. To overcome them, their perspectives on their strategic interests must be understood. For example: the international community's strategic interest in Afghanistan is focused on the threat of *al-Qaeda* and their allies, for which an Afghanistan able to secure and govern itself is necessary. The Afghan strategic interest is the mirror image: an Afghanistan able to secure and govern itself, for which they need to tackle the threat of *al-Qaeda* and their allies. Interests are aligned but they are not the same.

Similarly, Afghanistan's neighbors have their own view of their strategic interests. Pakistan's national security policy remains centered on India and they see Afghanistan through that prism. While they recognize the threat of a Talibanized Afghanistan, the Pakistani Army is naturally preoccupied with militancy threatening them now from the tribal areas along the Afghan border. For the first time they are fighting

hard to bring this under control. They are also having to re-examine the relationships between various militant groups – whether Pashtun, Punjabi or Kashmiri – which have burgeoned in the past two decades. Unregulated *madrassas* fuel the spread of this militancy, which successive governments have struggled to rein in. In the wider politics of Pakistan, anti-Americanism is never far below the surface...Some commentators in Pakistan even argue that the US presence in the region is aimed at their nuclear programme. No wonder the West and Pakistan sometimes talk past each other.

Likewise, in Iran, the military/security establishment fears encirclement by NATO or US forces to their north (Turkey), south (the Gulf), west (Iraq) and east (Afghanistan). While the international community might dismiss these fears, it must accept that, in a region plagued by insecurity and factional politics, they are sincere. And those fears lead some to the conclusion that an unstable Afghanistan is preferable to an unfriendly Afghanistan.

So, one of the most urgent tasks for those engaged in implementing Secretary Clinton's diplomatic surge [announced at a speech at the Asia Society in New York in early 2011] is to ensure that all the players understand the new landscape and recalibrate their own view of their strategic interests. This will require intense but calm and patient diplomacy. In that context, the expansion of Richard Holbrooke's brainchild – the International Contact Group for Afghanistan and Pakistan – was one of the most significant diplomatic initiatives of the past couple of years. The International Contact Group now includes several important Muslim nations (some of which are considering becoming ISAF contributors) and the addition of the Organization of the Islamic Conference – the OIC – to the international institutional framework. The OIC appointed their first ambassador to Afghanistan and its involvement demonstrates the truly international nature of the campaign against militancy which respects neither religion nor borders. It also provides a Muslim political environment in which the Afghan side is comfortable.

What does all this mean for a political strategy: reconciliation with the core *Taliban*? Four parameters – operational progress as the platform for sustainable transition, progress underwritten by enduring partnerships, acceptance throughout the region and acceptance throughout the Muslim world – frame a sustainable Afghan reconciliation process rather than an ephemeral political deal. While the international community can help set the conditions, that process must be Afghan-to-Afghan. And on that, the news is positive.

To President Karzai's credit, the most important political development was the Peace *Jirga* and subsequent High Peace Council. The *Jirga* confounded those who feared a populist backlash against international forces or a chaotic non-event.

Instead, the President and his team choreographed a national consensus which distinguished between irreconcilable militants and “disaffected compatriots” prepared to renounce violence and terrorism, and respect the constitution.

In a charged ethnic atmosphere, reconciling the *Taliban* could be seen by other ethnic groups as reuniting the *Pashtuns* at their expense. So locking in the *Tajiks*, *Uzbeks*, *Hazaras* and civil society, all of whom fear that reconciliation could be inimical to their interests, was a substantial political achievement.

Arguably more important than insurgent reintegration, in a communal but fragmented political culture, will be the work of the provincial peace councils in grass-roots conflict resolution. While we all refer to “the insurgency” or “the *Taliban*” as cohesive political movements, in actuality a kaleidoscope of local insurgencies are exploited and unified by an opportunistic *Taliban* leadership from the comfort of their sanctuaries in Pakistan or by criminal warlords. 90 percent of the insurgents fight within 10 kilometers of their homes. As the story of Marjah illustrated, most are not hard-line ideologues but “disaffected compatriots” who drift into fighting with the *Taliban* because of local grievances – predatory governance, tribal or ethnic exclusion from political and economic power, frictions over land, water and so on – or to exercise criminal control over the drugs and extortion rackets. While the insurgency won’t be brought to an end without tackling the source, much of the fuel can be taken out of it through delivering sustainable security and decent rule of law on the ground, and by resolving local conflicts and disputes. Provincial governors and provincial peace councils will be central to this and will need professional assistance, whether through the UN’s Salaam Support Group or some other mechanism.

As for the *Taliban* leadership, despite much speculation, they still show little interest in a genuine reconciliation process. Within their own world view, they act rationally. To appeal to their core *Pashtun* constituencies in both Pakistan and Afghanistan, they claim to be “the people’s *mujaheddin*” fighting a foreign occupation and they disavow the indiscriminate violence they inflict on their own people. But it is clear that their motive is power: the power to turn the clock back to the medieval barbarity of the 1990s regime, a regime they impose wherever they have the opportunity. While there are distinctions between the Afghan and Pakistani *Taliban* movements, their core objective is both ideological and nationalist: a Talibanized Pashtunistan bracketing the Durand Line as the first step to an Islamic Emirate in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Extraordinary though that sounds, it is about power. And that means there should be scope for dialogue. It is also why that dialogue must be Afghan-led.

As the Brahimi-Pickering Report for the Next Century Foundation pointed out, it has not been clear hitherto with whom the Afghans should negotiate or about

what. The headline recommendation – appointing an international reconciliation facilitator – somewhat overshadowed the most promising ideas in the Report. One such idea was how an inclusive political settlement – rebalancing power and resources between the executive and legislature, the centre and provinces, within Afghanistan’s unitary state – could meet the strategic interests and mitigate the strategic risks for all the key players, internal and regional.

This is a powerful concept and whether it is pursued by a single facilitator or several, it is worth exploring. Indeed, as we have learnt in other conflicts, the process can be part of the solution. Whether that includes direct talks with the *Taliban* leadership, events will determine. But, if the Foundation’s idea gains momentum, the *Taliban* leaders might find that everyone on whom they depend in both Afghanistan and Pakistan has found an alternative means of securing their interests.

Time for Diplomacy

Those who have been arguing for years for a political surge and a reconciliation process will doubtless wonder whether the rest are slow learners. As Talleyrand famously observed, diplomacy is about timing. The time is now right to take the risk and pursue the political agenda with the same energy brought to the military and civilian surges. In March 2010, the more excitable talk about reconciliation and transition risked signaling a scramble for the exit and thus reducing the prospects for a stable political settlement.

2010 was spent working quietly with others to put in place the political and diplomatic framework to exploit the operational progress that the surge had delivered under the outstanding leadership of General McChrystal, and subsequently General Petraeus.

Progress is fragile and reversible, but the initiative has been regained against the insurgency, and confidence and cohesion restored to the international coalition. 2011 is the year, as transition begins, to consolidate those gains – hard-won by the courage of international and Afghan forces. The risks and inevitable setbacks must be managed, and improvements made to the resilience of governance against the internal threat of warlordism and the external challenge from the insurgency. This will consolidate the confidence of the Afghan people in the Afghan state.

Progress, transition, partnership and regional stability should set the platform for a sustainable Afghan reconciliation process and a durable internal political settlement. That settlement will be complex, reflecting the fragmented politics of

Afghanistan, and much of it will be local. Whether it leads to a “peace deal” with the *Taliban* leadership depends on them. The task is to ensure that Afghanistan can secure and govern itself irrespective of what they decide, and that means helping the Afghans work towards an inclusive political settlement of the kind described in the Brahimi-Pickering Report.

This will require political and diplomatic action at every level from the Afghan village to the UN Security Council, because a stable reconciliation settlement within Afghanistan depends on a stable regional settlement with Afghanistan, and vice versa. That has been the diplomatic agenda for 2011 and every opportunity must be taken. The April NATO/ISAF Foreign Ministers’ meeting, June’s Defence Ministerial, the International Contact Group, the Istanbul regional summit in the autumn, Bonn II in December and the meeting of NATO/ISAF Heads of State and Government at the Summit in the US in 2012 – all are stepping stones to move the process forward.

There will be setbacks. Political processes are frustrating. There are forces of reaction that are itching to fire the starting gun on *Great Game 3.0*, and the insurgents will try to exploit this. Everyone will have to swallow difficult compromises. Insurgent warlords with the blood of our troops on their hands will have to be accepted within Afghan political life. So will Afghanistan’s other ethnic communities who suffered so many atrocities under *Taliban* rule. Those in power will have to share it. The *Taliban* will have to accept that their dream of turning the clock back to their repressive Islamic Emirate is over, and re-enter normal Afghan life with all the drudgery of the second-poorest country in the world. Afghanistan’s neighbors must accept that the *Great Game* is over: Afghanistan is no longer the turf on which their regional rivalries can be played out. And the international community must accept the burden of underwriting the Afghan political settlement if another spiral back into disaffection, factionalism, civil war and state failure is to be avoided. This will undoubtedly be a challenge. But it is a challenge we can meet.

Conclusion

In April 2009, security, governance, regional relations and coalition cohesion were in poor shape. By 2010, the initiative against the insurgency had been regained and confidence restored to the international coalition. That continued in 2011 as the military campaign gathered pace and transition began. But to achieve our strategic goals, that fragile but substantial operational progress must be turned into sustained political progress.

This will prove as complex as the military and civilian campaigns. Turning points are rarely apparent at the time, however inevitable they seem to historians. It is unknown whether the turning point in Afghanistan has passed, but the progress made in 2010 into 2011 has provided the opportunity to see this effort through to a successful conclusion. While there will still be a long hard road ahead, by remaining resolute, that road will lead to the stable Afghanistan and safer world for which so many have sacrificed so much. And to bring what General Petraeus has called “the longest campaign in the long war” to a successful conclusion, it is time for the diplomats to deliver too.