The Future of Afghanistan in South-West Asia: Influences & Challenges

SUMMARY REPORT

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Introduction

The impending international military withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014 raises a range of issues clearly of great import for Afghanistan and the wider world. Of particular concern is the foreboding sense that withdrawal will leave a political and strategic vacuum in Afghanistan which would not only impact upon the state (its institutions and peoples) but have ramifications for the neighbouring South-West Asian region. There are policy implications, too—what can be done at policy levels (local, regional, international) meaningfully to alleviate much of the burgeoning anxiety?

On 18–19 November 2013, the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy at the Australian National University held a workshop, drawing together leading specialists from Australia, Afghanistan, and the wider world. The context of the workshop was a growing sense that the political and military transitions in Afghanistan are likely to be critical to its long-term prospects for stability. The input of experts is paramount to making sense of Afghanistan’s transitions. Australian participants were joined by colleagues who travelled from Afghanistan, the United States, England, and Germany. In addition, several United Nations and Australian Government practitioners were present as observers and participated actively in the discussions. The workshop was held with the generous financial support of both the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) and the Research School of Asia & the Pacific (RSAP) at The Australian National University. The workshop resulted in an in-depth exploration of the most pressing challenges facing Afghanistan and its international and regional partners—issues of peace and security, governance, accountability and human rights, among them.

In addition to inviting academic papers, the workshop fostered a candid discussion of what needs to be addressed. In four clusters (and seven sessions) over two days, the participants canvassed the themes of ‘military withdrawal and international and regional implications’; ‘governance and peacebuilding’; ‘human security and accountability’; and ‘vulnerabilities’. This report summarises some of the key points that were raised by participants. It is not, however, an ‘agreed’ or even ‘consensus’ report. For this reason, no specific views can or should be attributed to any particular participant.
Executive Summary

The challenges that Afghanistan faces are multi-faceted and complex. A thorough understanding of the future of the country requires one to appreciate the manner in which the different elements that constitute the country are connected to one another.

The military withdrawal of international forces from Afghanistan is likely to have a huge impact on Afghanistan’s future and will present the country with major challenges. There are four main areas in which the withdrawal will affect Afghanistan’s future: (1) how the country’s relations with its region and the larger world are transformed, (2) how governance and peacebuilding are practised in that country, (3) how accountability and human security in that country are enhanced or undermined, (4) how the withdrawal creates new vulnerabilities within that country. By analysing the above-mentioned areas, participants were able to conclude that Afghanistan is facing a period of uncertainty, contestation, and prolonged transition.

I. Military Withdrawal, International Relations, and Regional Implications

The cluster on ‘Military Withdrawal, International Relations, and Regional Implications’ generated four main conclusions: (1) the fractured nature of the Afghan state continues to prevent it from engaging in comprehensive security deals with its neighbours in the region; (2) Pakistan’s internal/external fears and ambitions impel it to continue to play a destabilising role where Afghanistan is concerned; (3) the United States’ leverage in the region will shrink after its withdrawal and its strategic focus will shift from Afghanistan to Pakistan; and (4) the different countries in the region tend to focus on how to protect themselves from Afghanistan rather than how their actions impact upon Afghanistan. Below are further conclusions and policy recommendations:

- The immediate implication of military withdrawal is that the troop absence will both create a security vacuum and generate a simultaneous (and immediate) need for foreign investment and assistance to avoid a potential humanitarian crisis.
- The future of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the United States remains uncertain but is vital as an assurance towards meeting foreign investment and development assistance requirements, post-2014.
- The fractured nature of Afghan state and society prevents it from engaging in comprehensive security deals with its neighbours in the region.
- A strategy of ‘neutrality’ by the Afghan state could make neighbouring states feel less threatened by Afghanistan and compel them to recognise the destabilising nature of their own actions. However, such a strategy would be challenging in the current political environment, which is marked by uncertainty and interlocking security dilemmas.
- Pakistan’s fears concerning India and Afghanistan working together to undermine it fuel its ambition to create a weak and compliant Afghan state. Addressing Pakistan’s destabilising role is crucial to securing Afghanistan’s stability.
- Domestic fatigue with the conflict in Afghanistan and recognition that Pakistan poses a greater strategic threat drive current US attempts to disengage from Afghanistan. Paradoxically, the withdrawal of troops will reduce US presence and leverage in the region and lead to greater dependence on the Pakistani military and state.
- If Iran and the US resolve the nuclear issue between them and have a closer working relationship, they could better cooperate on security matters concerning Afghanistan.

II. Governance and Peacebuilding

The ‘Governance and Peacebuilding’ cluster identified four major factors that will determine the extent to which the Afghan state is capable of engaging in processes of governance and peacebuilding: (1) the level of state strength and the extent to which the rule of law is respected; (2) availability of economic tools to sustain the mechanisms of the state; (3) the nature of the structure of the society; and (4) the legitimacy of the state and its institutions. Below are some conclusions and policy recommendations:

- The integrity of the 2014 elections will play a major role in shaping societal perceptions of the legitimacy of the Afghan state and government.
The incentive to respect the rule of law in Afghanistan is relatively weak as the legitimacy of the government in rural areas is low, and the design of institutions is such that it leads to weak political representation.

The extractive and regulatory capacities of the Afghan state are still relatively weak and prevent the state from fulfilling its functions and meeting the needs of the people.

The Afghan state needs to strengthen its taxation system so that it can generate more revenues, rely less on foreign aid, and increase the accountability of its institutions.

III. Human Security and Accountability

The cluster on ‘Human Security and Accountability’ demonstrated that human security and accountability are inextricably linked and reached three main conclusions: (1) the fragility of the state’s institutions and the structure of state-society relations prevent the country from improving the lives of its people and remaining accountable to them; (2) the dim economic prospects faced by the country pose a major problem as to whether the state can meet the needs and aspirations of its people; and (3) the empowerment of Afghan youth provides the Afghan state and society with a powerful new source of accountability and the potential to break the cycle of violence that has hitherto afflicted the country. Below are further conclusions and policy recommendations:

- While Afghanistan to some degree needs a centralised government to overcome its political and social fragmentation, such a centralised government is also responsible for creating a culture of corruption where the state is viewed as a prize to be captured and from which resources can be extracted.

- A shift to a more ‘polycentric’ form of community governance which is comprised of parallel power structures along with a strong, centralised government would be more compatible with Afghan political culture. However, there is little recent historical basis for the establishment of such a system—hence, there is an urgent need for debate on the effectiveness of such a structure.

- The growing space for women’s political rights, the positive changes in attitudes concerning youths’ education, and greater economic opportunities provide Afghanistan with an opportunity to break its cycle of violence.

- There is potential for short-term economic stimulus in the airline, banking and hydrocarbon industries. The development of demand-driven expertise in these sectors could help the productivity of the overall economy and improve prospects for employment.

- Afghanistan needs another decade of peace and continued support before the gains it has made in the last several years can be sustained.

IV. Vulnerabilities

The cluster on ‘Vulnerabilities’ presented two major problems facing Afghanistan. They are: (1) the weakness of the party system in the country and how that exacerbates political dysfunction in the country, and (2) the plight of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country and the incapacity of the state to ameliorate their suffering and provide a solution to their problems. Below are further conclusions and policy recommendations:

- The failure of major political parties to institutionalise contributes to the political dysfunction and fragmentation of the country.

- Legislating stricter regulation of political parties could help to institutionalise parties but also generate bias towards larger, more established parties.

- The incapacity of the Afghan state in dealing with the plight of internally displaced persons in the country poses a major threat to the legitimacy of the government; this legitimacy will be tested further following the withdrawal of international forces.

- Political actors in Afghanistan should engage in greater strategic thinking rather than tactical thinking so as to confront common challenges facing the state instead of politicising them for narrow, short-term gains.
I: Military Withdrawal, International Relations, and Regional Implications

The substantial withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan in 2014 has significant regional implications and is likely to affect the relations of the different state and non-state actors that are involved in the region. The country that will be most affected by the US withdrawal is of course Afghanistan itself, which is likely to experience a shift in power dynamics on the ground as the different actors respond to the changing circumstances that the withdrawal will produce. The other countries that will be most impacted are Pakistan, India, Iran, and the US itself.

Afghanistan is currently neither at peace nor at war and is facing fissures within society when it comes to different understandings of citizenship and ideology. It is useful to view the country not as a unitary state but comprising multiple actors engaging in different practices of authority and rule; and often these actors find themselves in contest with one another. A return to a national civic life will be challenging as it involves a change of attitudes and this will be harder as the US withdraws its forces from the country. The fractured nature of governance in the country has also led to the creation and accumulation of a range of local security deals to tackle the various challenges that the country faces. A piece-meal approach, however, can be corrosive to the overall stability and security of the state in the long-term. This approach faces greater problems because one of the main actors on the ground, the Taliban, is not arguing its case in a civic fashion. On the contrary, it is pursuing its agendas in a brutal way that prioritises violence and undermines the state. After the US withdraws, how the various components of the Afghan state respond to the tactics of the Taliban will test the effectiveness of the current path taken by the state, and the path it will follow in the future.

Another test for the state is how it addresses three primary issues: (1) the immediate implications of the withdrawal of foreign troops; (2) the clarification of the basic ideology of the post-2014 Afghan state; and (3) the most effective path to return to a civic life that is not under the influence of the military. One major element that will shape how the Afghan state responds to these issues is how it will satisfy the continued requirement for investment and development assistance even after NATO/ISAF forces leave the country. To ensure that investment continues to be encouraged, there needs to be a new way of thinking about how Afghanistan can be part of what is an historically-volatile region without being a threat, or being perceived as a threat, due to its internal instability and absence of security. This will require ethical and effective responses in the immediate, medium and long term.

The US withdrawal was designed by President Obama to concentrate President Karzai’s and the other Afghan leaders’ minds when it came to governing the state. This, however, did not eventuate. The years since Obama’s landmark speech in 2009 have not seen a concerted effort by the Afghan state to expand its capacity to deal with the impending security vacuum. President Obama’s speech was also aimed at focusing the minds of leaders in Washington but, ironically, that has not materialised either. One consequence is that security remains problematic both internally and regionally. It is clear that current security practices, in general, are illusory, unsustainable, and potentially corrosive. The Afghanistan experience has been that military interference is not effective, but nothing has yet emerged to replace it. There is currently no policy or strategy on how the post-2014 Afghan state is going to deal with armed, violent, non-state actors such as the Taliban. The future of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) negotiated by both Afghanistan and the US remains uncertain and its effectiveness in ensuring stability in the long-term is unclear. How this issue is to be addressed is likely to loom large in the minds of ordinary Afghans as they deliberate on their future within the borders of Afghanistan, or elsewhere. What then does a viable future Afghan state look like? Chief among the alternatives is the degree of centralisation or regionalisation of governance that can best generate institutional legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary Afghan people. Afghanistan needs to be recognised as a legitimate entity within the region.

One possible option that Afghan leaders and citizens have been exploring and debating, in response to the US withdrawal and the challenges that it faces in the region, is the path of ‘neutrality’. There is a local concept of bitarafi which literally means ‘without sides’. Afghanistan in its modern boundaries was in part the result of a desire by the British and Russian empires to create a ‘buffer state’ between each other’s territory. While neutrality as a concept and form of practice needs to be more clearly defined (and is analytically distinct from the concept of ‘impartiality’), it usually entails not taking part in wars, not taking any sides in disputes, and not joining any military alliances. Different types of neutrality have been identified and the most prominent ones are: (1) permanent (constitutional) neutrality; (2) neutral policy; and (3) non-alignment. Neutrality can be functionalist (involving policy postures such as abstentions on UN votes) or situationalist (that is,
determined by geographic location). Neutrality is recognised as a legitimate international status but remains mainly a war-time concept that is applicable only during times of conflict and is often seen as the prerogative of the state. Neutrality is not simply a Western concept; it can be justified by reference to the works of several Islamic scholars who have studied the concept over the years.

Afghanistan’s past rulers advocated neutrality in official statements, and neutrality is often credited with imposing stability in early and mid-20th century Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s transition from a buffer state during the colonial period to a self-proclaimed ‘neutral’ state describes a natural trajectory of its history during the 19th and 20th centuries. The period between 1929 and 1979 is referred to as the ‘Era of Tranquility’. Neutrality can be a viable strategy for regional balance and resolution of security crises. There is also a domestic discourse of neutrality and some evidence that the Afghan people are happy with neutrality; and the increasing importance of democratic discourse in Afghanistan is arguably shaping positive views of neutrality as well.

Switzerland and Laos have shown that a strategy of neutrality is possible and they provide different models for neutrality. Yet comparisons of neutrality pose problems of their own. For instance, Laos had less political and economic autonomy relative to its neighbours, throwing its claims of neutrality into doubt. Furthermore, Afghanistan played no role in its being constituted as a buffer state, and lacked sovereignty in that particular process. Moreover, if Afghanistan seeks to follow a truly neutral path, it will require the acquiescence of its neighbours and that is something that cannot be guaranteed in the current political milieu. Finally, the language of neutrality can be used as a cover for other political purposes and this is something that must be verified in this particular context.

The other country in the region that will be significantly affected is Pakistan. Pakistan is the main regional player where Afghanistan is concerned and will play a significant role when it comes to deciding what political sovereignty actually means for Afghanistan. Pakistan has two primary and two secondary objectives when it comes to Afghanistan. The primary objectives are: (1) creating a subservient government in Afghanistan; and (2) producing a militarily-weak Afghanistan which will not threaten Pakistan’s sovereignty. The two secondary objectives are: (1) nullifying India’s influence in Afghanistan; and (2) using Mujahideen trained in Afghanistan in Kashmir without triggering major war with India. At the same time, Pakistan has three fears that shape its behaviour: (1) fear of ‘Balkanisation’ or of being subsumed into India; (2) fear of losing its nuclear capability; and (3) fear of a weakened position in Kashmir. There are still persistent memories of the dismemberment in 1971 which resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. India is still regarded by Pakistan as an existential threat, and a threat to its Islamic identity. When it comes to Afghanistan, in particular, Pakistan has two fears. One is the growing link between the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban and the other is the instrumentalisation of the Pakistani Taliban by the Afghan and Indian governments. Thus, while Pakistan has a history of being a state sponsor of terrorism and has never severed its links with the Taliban, fears have grown in more recent times that the tools of terrorism will end up aimed at its own state.

Pakistan’s fears and ambitions feed themselves and affect its policies when it comes to Afghanistan’s security. Pakistan views Afghanistan as providing ‘strategic depth’ for relocation of military assets and personnel in case of war with India. On the other hand, with shared concerns regarding the Durand Line and the potential threat of an independent ‘Pushtunistan’, Pakistan’s policies in Afghanistan are viewed by many Afghans as counter-productive and even nihilistic. In a general and strategic sense, three major factors shape Pakistan’s behaviour towards Afghanistan. They are: (1) Pakistan is caught in a pair of interlocking security dilemmas; (2) Pakistan has a persistent fear of ‘the Other’; (3) ideological fundamentalism leads Pakistan to see itself as a fortress of Islam in the region. Since these factors are likely to persist even after the withdrawal of international forces, there is good reason to believe that Pakistan will continue to pursue its objectives in post-2014 Afghanistan. Interlocking security dilemmas, however, exist everywhere and identity factors disappear when looking at specific events. Therefore, the usefulness of these factors in explaining Pakistan’s actions need to be explored further.

Another country that will be affected by the withdrawal is the US, which has played a dominant role in the region over the last decade. That said, there is continued debate about the extent of its interests and influence in the region. Its withdrawal from Afghanistan will dictate future US policy in both Afghanistan and Pakistan and affect the level of influence it can bring to bear. There has also been a change in hierarchy of objectives in the US. An evaluation of Pakistan’s internal security has challenged the notion that the Pakistani security situation is related to the Afghan security situation. The US increasingly views Pakistan not as a culprit but as a victim of terrorism emanating from within
Pakistan itself and, therefore, US policy now favors protection of Pakistan from this threat. This complicates the way in which the US views both countries. Furthermore, a mission that started out with the objective of revenge for the 11 September 2001 attacks led to the view that the sustainability of the mission depended on ambitious state-building efforts. Thus, military objectives were implemented by economic and political means. Soon, these means were overshadowed by the desire for success of military objectives which, in turn, affected civil-military relations.

The desire to leave, however, creates a different scenario. The security transition has become the most important concern and the US’s objectives have been redefined at the lowest possible level. The US has attempted to minimise the definition of what it means to be Al Qaeda and its affiliates. This has affected processes of reconciliation and peace resolution between the Afghan state and the various militant groups that are fighting against that state. The US has also shifted in its focus from military protection of Afghanistan to military protection of Pakistan. The US has three large-item objectives in Pakistan: (1) counter-terrorism; (2) the nuclear issue; and (3) democratisation. The exponential multiplication of tactical nuclear weapons in Pakistan has emerged as a major issue of concern for the US. The US has found that it has limited influence on Pakistan’s nuclear program. It is particularly worried that terrorism in India by militants with purported links to the Pakistani state will lead to nuclear conflict between the two countries.

There are some significant practical considerations underlying the US’s relationship with Pakistan, including logistics. After so many years involved in land-locked Afghanistan, a withdrawal of large amounts of military equipment through Pakistan naturally has direct implications for US-Pakistan political relations. It is estimated that 60 per cent of US military equipment must pass through Pakistan by road en route to a sea port for repatriation. This equates to one truck every seven minutes over a three year period. To deal with all these challenges and in light of its upcoming withdrawal, which might reduce its clout in the region, the US has reverted to reliance on a group, the Pakistani military that many observers see as responsible for many of these problems in the first place. This dependence on the Pakistani state and its military further complicates the US’s current and future relationship with both that country and Afghanistan.

One country that cannot be ignored is Iran. There are significant capacity differences between Iran and Afghanistan, with Iran having a much larger population and greater resources. There are also sectarian differences between the two countries – Iran is a majority Shiite country with Sunni minority groups while Afghanistan has a majority Sunni population with significant Shiite minorities. The Persians define the Pashtuns as ‘the Other’ while the Pashtuns do the same when it comes to the Persians. Iran sees the Middle East as its strategic priority while Afghanistan looks to the subcontinent and particularly, Pakistan. With regards to recent changes in Afghan state and society, there is a relative lack of interest. If this changes in the future, Iran might play an increasingly important role in the trajectory of Afghanistan’s future.

Iranian foreign policy has four dimensions: (1) hegemonic Iran, which acknowledges that Iran is the fountainhead of the Persian culture and where the Shiite version of Islam is enforced with a sense of superiority; (2) insecure Iran, which fears Western intentions following the September 11 attacks in the United States and considers the Western presence in Afghanistan as potential encirclement; (3) isolated Iran, which is based on the belief that that non-Iranian actors such as pro-Israeli interests in world politics are conspiring to isolate Iran from the normal workings of international politics; and (4) reasonable, rational Iran, which does not wish to see a return of the Taliban or the collapse of the Afghan government.

The primary consideration for Iran is its relationship with the US. Following the ‘Axis of Evil’ speech by President Bush in 2002, the ‘Cold Peace’ between Iran and the U.S. turned into a ‘Cold War’. The bilateral relationship with Afghanistan is less important, and as long as there is relative stability in Afghanistan, Iran is not too concerned. The nuclear issue remains the main point of discussion between the US and Iran. If there is an opening in the nuclear issue, there is a possibility of significant change in relationship between Kabul and Washington, and Kabul and Tehran. Iran has a keen interest in the Bilateral Security Agreement between Kabul and Washington, and has attempted to discourage Kabul from signing the agreement. Thus, the outcome of withdrawal of the US and NATO forces will affect US-Iran and Iran-Afghanistan relations in complex ways. The relationship between Iran and Pakistan is not very positive at present, primarily due to border issues in Baluchistan, and this further complicates the regional dynamics.

Finally, other countries in the region will play roles of varying importance after the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan. Countries in the Gulf will seek to play a major regional role, as funds to and...
II: Governance and Peacebuilding

There are several ways to measure whether Afghanistan has the capacity to engage in good governance and peace-building efforts, and how successfully it can do so in the future. They are: (1) the level of state strength and the extent to which the rule of law is practised; (2) availability of economic tools to sustain the mechanisms of state; (3) the nature of the structure of the society; and (4) the legitimacy of the state and its institutions.

According to Francis Fukuyama, there are two axes by which the nature of a state can be determined: (1) the scope of the state, that is, the range of activities in which the state seeks to become involved; and (2) the strength of the state, the adaptive capacity of the state in response to the pressures that it faces, and its ability to exercise control and authority. This relates to the degree of centralisation of the state as hierarchies may not be as resilient as a decentralised structure. Through these axes, it is possible to map the capacities of the Afghan government and the Afghan state. One variable that complicates the picture is that some internal structures of the state in Afghanistan are well developed while others are poorly developed. For example, the resource base of a state such as Afghanistan involves two major elements: extractive and regulatory capacities. In a functioning and well-regulated system, both elements are strong and both have the generalised normative support of the subject population which thus creates circumstances where less reliance needs to be placed on coercion by the state. This, however, is not necessarily the case when it comes to Afghanistan; there is ambiguity when it comes to the legitimacy of the current state of governance in Afghanistan.

Another factor that impacts on the strength of the state is the rule of law which provides greater legitimacy to the authorities that wield power within a state. It is generally acknowledged that holding leaders to account enhances legitimacy with the result that the capacity to implement policy is likely to be enhanced. This is fundamental to the rule of law which relies on authority, which in turn relies on a combination of power and legitimacy. In fact, if there is general legitimacy, there will be less reliance on more costly forms of dominance, such as the use of violence, to maintain order and stability. There are three requirements for legitimacy: (1) generalised and normative support; (2) shared beliefs; and (3) regulation by expression of consent. There are five sources of legitimacy: (1) external; (2) procedural; (3) structural; (4) substantive; and (5) output. Legitimacy allows pluralism to be maintained without undermining state authority. By strengthening the legitimacy of the state, the rule of law becomes a powerful tool that allows the state to govern and engage in peace-building.

The rule of law is a meta-legal principle and manifests itself through three factors: (1) clear, prospective law; (2) an independent judiciary; and (3) easy access to courts. The rule of law strengthens the effectiveness of leaders, paradoxically by constraining their power. However, if one of these three principles is not adhered to, ‘the law’ could become part of the problem rather than a solution. In Afghanistan, four different types of law can be considered relevant and are sources of inspiration. They are: (1) state law; (2) customary law; (3) Sharia law; and (4) international law. The fact that the Afghan state draws support from these different sources reveals a pluralistic legal environment which could potentially satisfy the expectations of multiple groups within the country. One question that can be raised, however, is whether a pluralistic legal system can be strong and whether such a system can maintain a consistent set of rules and provide...
the state with the capacity effectively to deliver goods to its people. Another question is whether Afghanistan is better served by clearly prioritising one particular form of law over others.

What are the incentives for consolidation of the rule of law for different actors within Afghanistan? There are obviously areas of potential conflict between these diverse bodies of law and their implementation, particularly in remote, rural and regional areas, where state legitimacy is not held in high esteem. Surveys conducted by The Asia Foundation indicate that state courts are perceived to be more corrupt than traditional dispute resolution mechanisms in Afghanistan. This is obviously an area for concern. People respond to different incentive structures differently, and pluralistic legal frameworks provide different incentives to different groups of people within a state. Consequently, these different incentive structures could come together to support and strengthen a state or undermine it.

One clear test of a state’s strength and the importance it attributes to rule of law is the manner in which it conducts elections. To run an election is to apply a framework of rules and since elections remain one of the most complex processes in which a state can engage, they provide a clear signal as to the strength and scope of the state. A successful and fair election can provide evidence of a resilient state that is capable of tackling significant challenges. Furthermore, elections can serve as mechanisms for peaceful change that could defuse conflicts, tension and imbalances of power on the ground. On the other hand, a fraudulent election can indicate the opposite and show that the state is insufficiently resilient to handle major problems that it faces. A fraudulent election can tip a fragile state into conflict. The elections of 2009 significantly damaged Afghanistan’s international image and the conduct of the 2014 elections will play a major role in how the country is viewed by other states and citizens of that country. This is particularly pertinent when the repercussions of a fraudulent poll are considered in the context of state legitimacy.

The economic capacity of the state provides a good indicator as to the state’s ability to engage in governance and peace-building. The importance of state-based revenue for the state-building enterprise cannot be overstated and the amount of capital that a state can generate will indicate its ability to manage its institutions and govern its people. In the case of Afghanistan, the amount of revenue that the state collects from its people and other economic activities and utilises for state-building projects is low. Afghanistan has a weak taxation system that is unable successfully to utilise the productivity of its population and natural resources. In fact, large amounts of revenue are depleted by poor state performance, resulting in the Afghan people indirectly paying high taxes. Since taxation leads to accountability which, in turn, leads to increased state capacity, the poor taxation system in Afghanistan does not inspire confidence that the state is capable of confronting challenges related to governance and peace-building. It must be acknowledged that the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) currently has approximately 100,000 personnel who are not paid for by the Afghan Government, but are paid by international funding. On a related note, there are too many government departments in Afghanistan resulting in significant overlap of functions, and thereby inefficiency, when it comes to provision of services to the public.

To cover the costs of maintaining the state and its institutions, Afghanistan relies on foreign aid and funding from external donors. External revenue as a percentage of state income is one of the highest in the world. This leads to the question of what will happen after donor money dries up following the withdrawal of international forces in 2014. Will Afghanistan be able to remain economically sustainable and to what extent can it cover the costs of dealing with violent insurgent groups and engaging in peace-building efforts? The answer to these questions will do much to determine the path that Afghanistan will be taking in the near future.

Another factor that determines a state’s scope and strength is the pattern of relations between the centre and the periphery. There is no doubt that good governance in the peripheral areas is as important to consider as in the central government. What are the expectations of the state? What is the degree of centralisation for effective service delivery to ordinary Afghans, including those in the peripheral areas? Afghanistan has a history of decentralisation whereby actors that are far from the centre (Kabul) have wielded significant power and control over territories, populations, and resources in various parts of the country. The catalytic role played by provincial cities is very important in this regard. The articulation and implementation of a democratic system in the last ten years was not sufficient to change this dynamic and shift power relations from the periphery to the centre. The incentive structures in Afghanistan are such that there was strong-man governance in the different provinces of that country. In the cases of the provinces of Balkh and Nangarhar there are observable differences and as such the notion of ‘strong-man’ governance should not be regarded monolithically. Many of the former warlords found that their capacity as governors eclipsed their power and resources as commanders and thus, they
were determined to advance internally in government. However, a strong governor who acts as a warlord, while potentially projecting the power of the state effectively, can also undermine meritocracy and the rule of law. Such actors engage in clientelistic practices that result in neopatrimonial forms of governance. This affects the manner in which the state interacts with the periphery, and as the centre outsources rule to the periphery, the overall structure of the state becomes neopatrimonial. Thus, both state-building and cronyism expand simultaneously in Afghanistan.

Perhaps what lies at the heart of the conflict in Afghanistan is the issue of governance. Governance is a complex concept that has both a ‘structure’ and ‘process’ component to it. It can be defined as institutional modes of societal organisation that provide collective goods. Good governance is often connected to other complex concepts and practices such as development, state-building and insurgency. However, good governance is not a pre-condition for these other practices as these practices are often immanent processes. Governance affects processes of bargaining amongst the different actors on the ground. To understand governance is to understand the nuances of networked power. The underlying networks of power that comprise a society are key to understanding the distribution of power in that society. Within the context of Afghanistan, one could argue that the intervention was over-centralised and under-resourced. According to the expert Astri Suhrke, the over-determining context of intervention in Afghanistan has led to path dependence and inevitable problems.

In the case of transition in Afghanistan there are three basic viewpoints. One is the imperial argument that claims that development is not really about good governance but about the hard interests of development participants. The second argument is the ‘window of opportunity’ argument which argues that the early support for international intervention in the post 9/11 environment was exhausted as the initial footprint was not heavy enough and was inconsistently applied, resulting in over-centralisation and an inequitable outcome. The third argument is the ‘doomed to failure from the very beginning’ argument.

The 2014 election, like other elections, has the potential to up-end the consolidation of power in the provinces by the former warlords. Thus, they are a potential flashpoint in relation to security and in relation to the integrity of the legal framework. An argument can be made, however, that the reduction in the international presence in post 2014 Afghanistan may open up more opportunity for legitimate political settlements.

Some of the lessons that can be learned from the last several years are that: (1) categories of individuals should not be treated monolithically; (2) attention should be paid to the periphery rather than simply the centre; and (3) it is important to differentiate normative ambitions and empirical realities.

III: Human Security and Accountability

The withdrawal will have a great impact in Afghanistan on the internal political dynamics, mechanisms of accountability within the state and society, as well as on human security at the local level. Afghanistan is comprised of tribal- and community- based governance systems while, at the same time, it has a clearly-articulated centre in Kabul. There are several good reasons, in the eyes of some, why Afghanistan might need centralised government: to (1) overcome natural geography and social topography; (2) control and rationalise independently-minded groups; (3) subdue local warlords and landowners; (4) safeguard national integrity against ethnic secession; and (5) prevent and ameliorate the effects of state disruption. Strong, centralised government, however, could be the cause of some of Afghanistan’s problems. Instead of providing stability and prosperity, it could lead to increased social fragmentation and disharmony.

This raises the question of what generates state stability and what contributes to state failure. Factors such as geography, culture, religion and topography cannot be assumed to be the causes of national wealth or stability. The 11th century Islamic scholar, Yusuf Hajib Khass Balsagbuny, has a theory of nation-building that comprises of three essential elements: military, money and justice. This is very similar to Charles Tilly’s famous formulation that the three elements of nation-building are coercion, capital and legitimacy. Complementing this view, and according to James Robinson – author of Why Nations Fail – what matters is the choice of particular state or social institutions. The choice and design of these institutions can play a major role in determining whether the Afghan state and society can tackle the challenges that it faces. Some of the challenges that Afghanistan faces are: (1) fragile institutions that do not serve the interests of the people; (2) dependence on patronage and foreign subsidies; (3) intolerance of diversity; (4) dehumanisation of opponents and strengthening of identity politics; (5) enhancement of the role of religion in politics; and (6) corruption and nepotism leading to trust deficits. Moreover, the centralised nature of the presidential system has created an environment in which the state is seen as
a prize to be captured and used to extract more resources by different actors. Extractive economic institutions under the control of the political elites have advantaged a few and disadvantaged the bulk of the population.

One question this raises is: how do you break this cycle and raise accountability in Afghanistan? One way in which this cycle can be broken is by creating a political framework where local officials in peripheral areas are locally hired rather than centrally appointed. This can potentially create circumstances where the locally-hired official has more incentive to serve the local population rather than the central government, leading to greater accountability on the ground.

The design of Afghan institutions should take into account four elements of Afghan political culture: (1) kingship; (2) kinship; (3) Islam; and (4) foreign subsidies. One solution that would take into account these four elements as well as the challenges that the country faces is a transition to more polycentric community governance. It is important first to consider the historical precedent for a polycentric community governance model and investigate if there is a historical basis to establish such a system. The model itself would involve the creation of parallel power structures along with a strong, centralised government. This raises the question of which rights and responsibilities to accord Kabul and which of the same to transfer to the provinces and villages. This will transform subjects into citizens by helping them elect government officials at the central, provincial and district levels. Thus, decentralisation can bring about transformative change and reconnect the periphery to the centre. One disadvantage of such a model is that decentralisation and federalism have become unfashionable and loaded concepts in Afghanistan. It might be more useful to talk about the decentralisation of power rather than the decentralisation of the state or its institutions.

There has been a cultural shift in Afghanistan in the last 12 years that could potentially be helpful when it comes to both breaking the cycle of violence mentioned earlier, and increasing accountability. This is the growing space for progressive rights for women and education of youth. The agenda for women in Afghanistan is prominent within the international community and has become important for some Afghans as well. Women’s employment is becoming a norm in the bigger cities and more progressive legal frameworks to protect the rights of women have been devised. The women’s rights agenda, however, is seen as mostly imported and thus perceived by some as Western in origin. Therefore, there is reluctance on the part of some Afghan women activists and politicians to adopt that agenda. It remains difficult for women to mobilise as activists when it comes to fighting for greater female rights. Since the women’s agenda may be compromised after the 2014 withdrawal of international forces, maintaining and strengthening an overall progressive legal framework is required to safeguard women’s rights and ensure that the state remains accountable for their situation within the country.

There has also been a major shift when it comes to attitudes concerning the education of boys and girls. In the past, it was common for the elderly to have a special place within Afghan society while youths had a less prominent voice within that society. As youths become the breadwinners of their families, however, they have gained greater prominence and respect within their communities. As youths (25 and under) account for more than 60% of the population, their wishes and desires can no longer be overlooked, particularly in a democratic system. Even in remote and rural areas, there has been a shift in attitudes when it comes to educating children, although there remain lingering perceptions that education takes children away from traditional livelihoods such as farming. Yet there is potential for the new generation to avoid the mistakes of the past. The current youth, however, are not engaged in politics and feel both powerless and a deep sense of fragmentation. It is important for Afghanistan’s future that the youth mobilise politically, take on positions of leadership, and actively contribute to Afghan politics. Political mobilisation of youth, and education and political rights, are key to ensuring Afghanistan’s progress, and test the degree of the state’s accountability to its population.

Despite these bright spots, significant problems remain for Afghanistan. Corruption has become entrenched throughout the political system and is exacerbated by the contributions of foreign sub-contracting, drug-related problems, and resource extraction. This has contributed to insecurity and instability as well as a lack of accountability, all of which are causing major problems. In general, state-building provides many rent-seeking opportunities and since the country has been undergoing a period of reconstruction and development, there was space for corruption to blossom. The patronage networks that were formed out of this corruption might be creating equilibrium at the national level but they are highly destabilising at the local level. Curbing corruption by spending less money was not seen as a credible option as the country required a massive influx of capital to re-develop. Furthermore, the importance of drug money has increased at absolute and relative levels, further increasing corruption and
undermining human security. Transparency International listed Afghanistan in 2005 as ‘middle of the road’; eight years later in 2013 Afghanistan was ranked 174th (out of 176 nations) on its list. As one conference participant quipped, ‘Afghanistan went up two places by bribing the other two countries.’

Once the US and international troops leave, the balance of armed power will shift to the local and regional levels which will likely lead to revenge killings and armed retaliation. This could significantly undermine human security. This will occur in an environment where radicalisation of youth becomes more prominent as the insurgency continues to fester, and opportunities for people living in the country dissipate, particularly in conflict prone areas. It will also occur in a situation in which refugees are still returning home from neighbouring countries.

Another important question is what will President Karzai’s role be after he steps down from power and consequently, what will happen to the patronage networks that he has set up and whether they will be accountable to the wider state. One possible scenario is that as development funds dry up, there will be greater prioritisation of development resources and professionalisation of individuals. The desire for enhanced political stability might bolster efforts against corruption in the short-term.

The productivity of, and livelihood opportunities for, Afghan people must be improved so that they can better contribute to both their own futures and the future of Afghanistan. This will be even more difficult to realise in the face of troop and services withdrawals, and shrinking foreign financial input; all of which is likely to create a major fiscal crisis. The Afghan population is growing rapidly, and so are their demands. Only 30% of the total land mass is conducive for farming, and only 13% is arable. Additionally, Afghanistan suffers drought and ineffective irrigation - this causes hardship and saps the productivity of the country. There are also problems with cold storage and access to markets.

To make matters worse, there are 400,000 people joining the job market annually. While agriculture still remains one of the main sources of livelihood, more and more people are coming to Kabul and other major cities every year seeking employment. Kabul, for instance, has a population of five million and is expanding without any control. Incentives need to be found to persuade returning refugees to return to their home provinces rather than remain in the major urban centres. High urbanisation is a real problem in Afghanistan. Combined with high unemployment and a heavily-armed public, the potential for intense and widespread urban-based crime, unrest and violence is very high.

There is a lack of strategy and political will, however, when it comes to addressing the problem of youth unemployment. For instance, there are lots of quick fixes in terms of employment but few sustained infrastructure-based jobs created. There is potential for economic stimulus in the airline, banking, and hydrocarbon industries but combined with poor access to credit, hindrances to trade across borders, and the absence of an adequate framework for enforcement of contracts, the room for sustained economic growth is rather low. The development of the mining sector is hampered by a lack of skilled labour. The problem is exacerbated as skilled positions are being filled by people from neighbouring countries such as India and Pakistan. One requirement is the development of demand-driven expertise in some of the sectors mentioned above, namely aviation, mining and banking. To make matters worse, after the international troops leave, the total financial resources available to the government will decrease dramatically; the share of the national government’s contributions, however, will increase. This has the potential to increase corruption levels. Finally, the withdrawal of foreign troops and closure or reduction in support bases will be felt most acutely at the local level in those regions where the bases are located.

To ensure sustained economic growth in general, Afghanistan needs short, medium and long term plans to build a sustainable economic future. This does not dispute the fact that Afghanistan has made significant gains in the last several years. A growing and significant middle class has established itself in the country. These gains, however, are fragile and for them to become more sustainable, another decade of peace and support is needed. One lesson to be learned from this section is that human security and accountability are inextricably tied together; improvement in one could lead to progress in the other while a decline in one could lead to deterioration in the other.

IV: Vulnerabilities

Two major vulnerabilities pose major short-term and long-term challenges. One is the weakness of the party system in Afghanistan. The other is the plight of internally displaced persons in Afghanistan and the incapacity of the Afghan state and actors in resolving their situation.

One major feature of the Afghan political milieu is the militarisation of political parties in Afghanistan. Many of the current parties are derived from former political and military factions that were engaged in conflict long before the US
invasion of 2001. In 2003 when the Afghan law on political parties was promulgated, it was regarded as relatively liberal. The minimum requirement to register a party was a membership of 700 individuals. The law also prohibited force or threat of force from being part of the policy platform, banned the incitement of ethnic or religious tension by parties, forbade any links to the military and strongly discouraged the expression of anti-Islamic sentiments. The low threshold in terms of membership numbers led to a wide proliferation of new parties and contributed to the fragmentation of the Afghan political scene. Between 2003 and 2009, more than 100 political parties came into existence. In order to encourage fewer parties and make them more institutionalised, certain steps were taken. In 2009, the membership threshold was increased to 10,000 to stem the proliferation of an increasing number of parties. The parties were also encouraged to be more inclusive and national rather than identity-based, regional entities. In 2012, new regulation was devised which required political parties to have offices in 20 out of the 34 provinces to maintain registration. Females were encouraged to participate in and run as candidates for their parties. How these changes will affect the 2014 elections remains uncertain. One potential consequence is that they provide bias towards larger parties at the expense of smaller parties.

A number of questions in relation to political parties were raised: what do the political parties actually stand for? Who are in these parties? What is the representation of women? What are the internal mechanisms of the parties? Do they have a principled approach? These questions are timely because the level of public confidence is currently rather low and Afghanistan is going through a period of high uncertainty. It looks like almost every single ticket includes someone who is accused of human rights violations.

The 2014 Presidential election and the subsequent transition should provide observers with a good indication of the state of party politics in Afghanistan. The 2014 election could be potentially a catalyst for violence which could delegitimise the incoming government in the eyes of ordinary Afghans or it could also provide an opportunity for greater diversity in the political spectrum.

This raises questions concerning the impact of parties on the Afghan political environment. Are the fragmentation of politics in Afghanistan and fragmentation of parties linked? Are parties contributing to a system of political integrity or are they undermining that system? Can the Taliban move from being a militia to a political party and are there any parties that offer a principled approach? One historical point that was noted is that politics in Afghanistan has less to do with policy and is more a continuation of patronage. Thus, the parties are highly personalised and there is little differentiation based on policy.

The other major vulnerability is the incapacity of the state to deal with the plight of internally displaced persons. There are 12.5 million Afghans who live in conflict-related areas who are potentially exposed to violence from various actors contesting the authority of the state. Many of these places are difficult to access, making it a challenge for the national government to offer protection and provide services to the people living there.

Although Afghanistan has been the largest global recipient of development aid over the last ten years, it ranks 175th out of 185 countries on the Human Development Index. Development aid has been seen as promoting a corrupt government rather than directly helping internally-displaced persons and other vulnerable people that are part of Afghan society. In fact, aid is not reaching large parts of the Afghan population due to corruption and security issues created by the insurgency. There is increased fatigue among donors. They raise the question of how humanitarian actors can be principled if the Afghan government cannot prove that it can deal with the funding and cannot prove to its own people that it remains accessible to them. Afghanistan, however, is the only country where virtually all aid donors are also belligerents and are accused of being political actors. Most of the aid money is given to only one side in the conflict, raising questions regarding the donors’ impartiality. The United Nations itself is compromised as all contributing nations to the NATO/ISAF mission are also members of the UN. More generally, this raises the point of whether humanitarianism should be seen as a form of anti-politics that does not attempt to solve the underlying political challenges faced by a society.

The capacity of the Afghan government to deal with the plight of internally displaced persons and other marginalised people will be tested in 2014 when the US and NATO withdraw their forces. Scholars and policymakers have all the tools and mechanisms to gauge what is happening and will be using these tools to test early warning signals. The exit options for the government, however, are closing down and there is little evidence that the government is engaging in advanced planning to deal with challenges such as increased internal displacement and migration of the Afghan population to urban centres, declining economic activity, a coming fiscal crisis, and the continued inability of the government to deliver its programs effectively throughout the country. Moreover, the
government is choosing not to use existing tools to deal with these challenges because of the politicisation of these tools. This raises the question of whether the Afghan polity resides in a tactical environment where strategic thinking and planning is severely inhibited, and points towards the strong possibility that Afghanistan post-2014 is likely to be a divided country.
Participants

Ms Shaharzad Akbar is a member of the Central Council of Afghanistan 1400 civil-political movement and is partner and Chief Operating Officer (COO) at QARA Consulting, Inc. in Kabul, Afghanistan. Shaharzad was also the first elected Chairperson for Afghanistan 1400 (July 2012-July 2013). Shaharzad studied anthropology at Smith College and completed the MPhil in Development Studies at the University of Oxford, as a Weidenfeld Scholar. Shaharzad has represented Afghanistan 1400 in numerous high level gatherings and has led several political initiatives of the movement. In her capacity as QARA’s COO, she has designed, led and implemented major research projects covering various provinces of Afghanistan, engaging high-level government officials and prominent international and Afghan scholars. Shaharzad has extensive media and development work experience in Afghanistan. In 2005, she was the journalism intern for the book Women of Courage. Reporting for the book, she traveled across Afghanistan to meet and interview active Afghan women in all sectors. In 2009, Shaharzad worked as a senior analyst and reporter for the principal domestic elections observers group in Afghanistan. She has also played a lead role in organising several national conferences and events, most significantly the Afghan-Pak Joint Peace Jirga in 2007.

His Excellency Mr Nasir Ahmad Andisha is the Ambassador of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to the Commonwealth of Australia, New Zealand and the Republic of Fiji. Prior to this appointment as Ambassador to Australia, Ambassador Andisha was the Director General of the Fifth Political Division (US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) from 2009 to 2011 at the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs and from 2006 to 2007 he was the Director of Multilateral Economic Relations and International Financial Institutions. Earlier, he worked as the Chief of Staff for the Deputy Foreign Minister (2005-06). Mr Andisha has also worked at the Energy Charter Secretariat in Brussels as a consultant and in 2008 he briefly served in the Permanent Mission of Afghanistan at UN Headquarters in New York City. Before joining the Foreign Service, Mr Andisha worked with the International Committee of the Red Cross as a field officer. He also taught International Relations and Principles of Economics at the Institute of Diplomacy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Afghanistan. In summer of 2007, Mr Andisha received a Fulbright Scholarship and completed his MA degree in international relations at The George H. Bush School of Government and Public Services at Texas A&M University.

Mr Nematullah Bizhan is a doctoral scholar at the Australian National University, studying the effects of foreign aid on state-building in developing countries, examining in particular the case of Afghanistan. Between 2001 and 2009, he participated in Afghanistan development and institution building efforts and he has worked in different capacities with the Afghan government, and international development and civil society organisations. Some of the positions which he has held include: Director General for Policy, Monitoring, and Evaluation of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy; head of the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board Secretariat, and Deputy Minister for Youth. As a Fulbright Scholar he also holds an MA degree in Development Economics from Williams College, Massachusetts. He has widely published on Afghanistan and the region and has been interviewed by national and international media.

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**Professor Paula Newberg** is Clinical Professor of Government at the University of Texas at Austin, and Fellow of the Wilson Chair. Her work focuses on the intersections between human rights, democratic governance and foreign policy in crisis and transition states, with particular focus on south and central Asia. A scholar and practitioner with wide-ranging experience in multilateral and nongovernmental organisations, Professor Newberg served as Special Advisor to the United Nations and the United Nations Foundation in Asia, Europe and Africa. She was a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where she co-founded its Democracy Project and directed its South Asia Roundtable, and was Guest Scholar at the Brookings Institution. Prior to coming to UT-Austin, she was the Director of the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University. Dr. Newberg has written extensively on constitutional development and jurisprudence in Pakistan, the politics of assistance in and to conflict and post-conflict states, and rights in complex emergencies. As Fellow of the newly established Wilson Chair at UT Austin, she is establishing research curricular, training, archiving and policy programs with institutions in south Asia. At UT-Austin, she teaches courses on rights and the state in modern south Asia, and the politics of complex emergencies in south Asia and beyond.

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**Ambassador Richard C. Smith** joined the then Department of External Affairs in 1969. He served in Australia’s missions in New Delhi, Tel Aviv, Manila and Honolulu, before being appointed as a Deputy Secretary in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in 1992. From March 1994 to the end of 1995, Mr Smith served on secondment to the Department of Defence as Deputy Secretary Strategy and Intelligence. Mr Smith took up duty as Australian Ambassador to the People’s Republic of China in February 1996 and served in that position until February 2000. From January 2001 to 31 October 2002, Mr Smith served as Australian Ambassador to the Republic of Indonesia. He was recalled to Canberra to take up duty as Secretary of the Department of Defence in November 2002. He served in this position until his retirement from the Australian Public Service on 1 December 2006. In April 2009 he was appointed Australia’s ‘Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan’. Mr
Smith was named an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) in the 1998 Australia Day Honours List and was awarded the Public Service Medal (PSM) ON 17 October 2003. In September 2004, he was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Letters by the University of Western Australia.

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