

The Challenges and the Benefits for U.S. National Security of Providing Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan

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*The Challenges and the Benefits for U.S. National Security of
Providing Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan*

Testimony of Laurel E. Miller¹
The RAND Corporation²

Before the Committee on Homeland Security and Government Affairs
Subcommittee on Federal Spending Oversight and Emergency Management
United States Senate

May 9, 2018

Good afternoon, Chairman Paul, Ranking Member Peters, and distinguished members of the subcommittee. Thank you for the invitation to testify at this important hearing. In the context of the subcommittee's oversight of U.S. government spending in Afghanistan, I have been asked to address the effectiveness of U.S. spending toward building a stable democracy in that country. I will offer the subcommittee several observations on the ways in which this type of spending is thought to advance U.S. national security interests and on the challenges that the Afghan context poses for implementation of U.S. assistance. My intent is to take a broadly framed approach to considering the question of effectiveness and to suggest factors that could be considered in setting realistic expectations for the impact of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan. I will conclude by recommending a path forward in Afghanistan that might enable the United States to continue gradually reducing the scale of its financial commitment while mitigating risks. U.S. assistance to Afghanistan over the past sixteen-plus years has been enormous in scale and enormously complex in its substantive details, with security and civilian assistance components and multiple U.S. agencies involved in implementation; my brief comments today will, therefore, necessarily be broad-brush.

The Logic Behind U.S. Assistance to Afghanistan

A useful starting point is to recall the rationale for U.S. government spending in Afghanistan. The U.S. motivation for invading Afghanistan in 2001 and ousting the Taliban regime was not,

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of the RAND Corporation or any of the sponsors of its research.

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of course, to make Afghanistan a nicer place for Afghans but, rather, was to pursue U.S. national security interests in destroying al-Qaeda and—because it had provided safe haven to al-Qaeda—the Taliban. The driving imperative of the U.S. strategy thereafter has been to prevent al-Qaeda and other international terrorists from regaining or gaining a foothold in Afghanistan and to prevent the return to power of the Taliban regime. This has necessitated filling the vacuum created by the U.S. invasion by supporting the establishment of a government of a different regime type from the Taliban and by developing that government’s capabilities to fight the Taliban, provide for the country’s security over the long-haul, and serve as a counter-terrorism partner for the United States.

Focusing in on the U.S. effort to build Afghan security forces so that they can bear the main burden of providing security in the country, the primary challenge has been to create security institutions that are well led, are reasonably free of corruption, and have self-sustaining systems for logistics and management. Experience has shown that those institutional attributes cannot be manufactured through short-term or narrowly conceived technical advisory efforts; they are part of a broader landscape of governance and the uses and abuses of power in Afghanistan. Improving that landscape is a lengthy and multifaceted endeavor. Moreover, getting Afghanistan to a place where it can afford to pay for its own security requirements presents a further challenge. The Afghan government spends about a quarter of its resources on security—a huge proportion by international standards—but that contribution covers only about a tenth of the costs of the government’s security forces; the United States and other foreign donors cover the rest. Without a lot of help in setting a foundation for economic growth, the Afghans will be hard-pressed to even begin to close that wide gap in any foreseeable time frame.

The basic dilemma of policy in Afghanistan—and the reason why high levels of U.S. spending have continued to be seen as required—remains what it has been since the Taliban insurgency arose in the years following the U.S. invasion and since American leaders decided that the United States needed to counter the insurgency: The United States cannot only battle its way to establishing enduring stability in Afghanistan. Decisions that the United States made in pursuit of its own security interests led to the adoption of an Afghanistan strategy that depends on producing, at American expense, sufficient political stability, government popularity, and economic development in a country that is still one of the world’s poorest and least institutionalized.

The Macro-Level Picture of Assistance Impact

The effectiveness of U.S. assistance to Afghanistan can be examined on a project-by-project basis, looking at whether particular initiatives were competently executed and achieved the specific intended results. But using a wider lens, it is also possible to gauge effectiveness by examining the impact that the totality of U.S. and other international aid has had on Afghan society. Effectiveness in this sense is more about the achievement of broad policy goals than it is about questions of aid-project efficiency and waste. U.S. assistance has certainly produced important macro-level positive development results—although I would caution that recent dips in some indicators, corresponding with declines in aid levels and the U.S. and NATO troop drawdown, raise concerns about the sustainability of results.

A variety of statistical indicators show that health, education, access to information, and other facets of life in Afghanistan have improved significantly, spurred largely by foreign donor spending. A few examples are:

- Life expectancy has increased from 55.5 years to 63.7 since 2000.³
- The size the economy has nearly doubled since 2008, although with a slight drop since 2014.⁴
- The number of children in school has increased from an estimated 1 million, mostly boys, in 2002, to more than 9.2 million, 39 percent of whom are girls.⁵
- Mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people have gone from 0 to over 62 since 2000.⁶

Although Afghans routinely tell outside observers that their country is vastly changed since 2001, a characterization supported by data such as those highlighted briefly above, the economic picture has begun to deteriorate together with the security picture. The economic growth rate in 2017 was 2.6 percent, well below the 9.6 percent average annual rate from 2003 to 2012, according to the World Bank.⁷ As economic growth became sluggish, the poverty rate increased to just above 39 percent in 2013–2014 (the latest available data), up from 36 percent in 2011–2012, meaning that 1.3 million people fell into poverty in the intervening period. Rural areas, where most of the population resides, saw the biggest increase, from 38.3 to 43.6 percent. Most jobs created in the service sector prior to 2014 were lost.⁸ Adding to the mixed picture, data compiled by the World Bank for its Worldwide Governance Indicators show that Afghanistan has made modest progress in improving government effectiveness and regulatory quality, but none in controlling corruption.⁹

Those positive development outcomes that have been achieved as a consequence of U.S. and other foreign donor spending in Afghanistan have no doubt improved the lives of many Afghans. Whether these outcomes have had an impact on the main security-oriented goals that have driven that spending is a separate question. Again, the theory behind using U.S. assistance to promote Afghan economic and human development, public service delivery, and institutional capabilities is that doing so will produce political stability, popular support for the government, and sustainable capacity for Afghans to take care of their own security and economic needs and work with the United States in denying space to terrorist groups that could threaten U.S. interests.

³ World Bank, World Bank Open Data, Afghanistan, 2018 (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan>).

⁴ World Bank, World Bank Open Data, Afghanistan, 2018 (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan>).

⁵ U.S. Agency for International Development, “Afghanistan: Education,” webpage, last updated April 25, 2018, citing data from the Afghan Ministry of Education (<https://www.usaid.gov/afghanistan/education>).

⁶ World Bank, World Bank Open Data, Afghanistan, 2018 (<https://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan>).

⁷ For 2017 real GDP growth rate, see World Bank, “The World Bank in Afghanistan,” last updated April 10, 2018 (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview#1>); for 2003–2012 average annual rate, see World Bank, *Afghanistan Development Update, November 2017*, Washington, D.C., 2017 (<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/28928>).

⁸ World Bank, “The World Bank in Afghanistan,” last updated April 10, 2018 (<http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/afghanistan/overview>).

⁹ World Bank, Worldwide Governance Indicators (<http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/#home>).

Reality has shown, however, that the linkage between producing development outcomes of the kinds cited earlier and achieving Afghan government stability, legitimacy, and sustainable capabilities is, at a minimum, not a straight and direct line, at least not within the time frame of a single generation. Although in certain areas government capabilities appear to have improved markedly in recent years (for instance, in public revenue collection and in some elements of the security forces), on the whole, neither political nor security conditions in Afghanistan are more stable than they were a decade ago.

Challenges of the Afghan Context

Despite the macro-level improvements noted earlier, Afghanistan is still one of the world's poorest countries.¹⁰ It remains—as it historically has been—dependent on external financing, and it will forever be arid and landlocked. Moreover, several decades of conflict have helped to entrench predatory economic practices and have impaired the development of the country's human capital. And Afghanistan has long attracted interference by neighbors and regional powers. Against the backdrop of these fundamental conditions and, importantly, the fact that conflict is ongoing and intensifying, it can hardly be surprising that implementing assistance programs is extraordinarily difficult. Certainly, it is the case that U.S.-funded projects have not all been perfectly conceived, planned, and executed, and U.S. agencies should always strive to do better in improving the elements of assistance delivery that are within their control. But in realistically setting expectations and evaluating effectiveness, the significant limitations imposed by the conditions in Afghanistan need to be appreciated.

The challenges posed by such conditions are not unique to Afghanistan. A RAND study found that even though most nation-building interventions of the last quarter century have resulted in improved security, economic growth, and human development, they do not rapidly transform societies. Even where important progress is made, the local conditions tend to limit the absolute outcomes of outsiders' interventions. Within a decade after such interventions, ineffective governments largely remained so, poor societies remained poor, and lootable resources continued to be looted.¹¹

A particularly difficult condition to alter is corruption, and in this regard, too, Afghanistan is not unique. Despite burgeoning growth since the mid-1990s in anticorruption initiatives and in attention to the problems the initiatives are meant to solve, progress in actually reducing levels of corruption in countries around the world has been exceedingly limited. Success stories are few (and nonexistent among countries at Afghanistan's level of development), positive change is slow at best, and evidence of the constructive impact of external actors (aid donors and other

¹⁰ Afghanistan is number 210 out of 228 countries and territories in terms of GDP per capita. CIA, "Country Comparison: GDP Per Capita," *The World Factbook*, 2017 (<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2004rank.html>).

¹¹ James Dobbins, Laurel E. Miller, Stephanie Pezard, Christopher S. Chivvis, Julie E. Taylor, Keith Crane, Calin Trenkov-Wermuth, and Tewodaj Mengistu, *Overcoming Obstacles to Peace: Local Factors in Nation-Building*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-167-CC, 2013 (https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR167.html).

foreign partners) is slight. In countries where corruption is endemic, it is deeply embedded in the social order and not susceptible to rapid correction.¹²

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the challenges of the Afghan environment, and the friction those challenges create for effective delivery of U.S. assistance, mean that the United States should not be providing any such aid. Rather, I am suggesting that expectations of the pace and scale of change that such external financing can promote should be realistic and that U.S. policy choices should reflect such realism. One lesson that could be drawn from U.S. spending in Afghanistan is that, where starting conditions are particularly difficult, time is probably more valuable than money. Altering those conditions cannot be greatly sped up by pushing out large sums of assistance quickly rather than stretching them over a longer time frame.

An Alternative Way Forward

If the record of effectiveness is mixed and the baseline conditions inhibit more-dramatic results, then the crucial question comes back to one of policy: To what extent do U.S. national security interests justify continuing to spend assistance dollars while accepting that, inevitably, there will be leakages, losses, and imperfections? Answering the question should take into account that the Afghan government and security forces that have been established with U.S. financing are, in their current form, dependent on the continuation of such financing. At the extreme end of a range of options, rapid elimination of U.S. assistance—particularly funding for Afghan security forces—would likely lead to a rapid downward slide of security and political stability.

In my judgment, U.S. national security interests in Afghanistan could best be advanced by mounting a robust diplomatic initiative to negotiate a settlement of the conflict that would fold the Taliban into Afghan politics, enable the United States to narrow its security mission to counterterrorism, and set the conditions for ultimately normalizing the scale of the U.S. assistance commitment. Maximizing the potential for success of this approach would require putting the U.S. military effort, and the assistance effort, in support of diplomacy—in particular to demonstrate U.S. resolve to prevent the failure of the Afghan government until a settlement is concluded. A political settlement would not obviate the need for some continued U.S. assistance to Afghanistan to support the implementation of an agreement, although aid priorities would probably require adjustment. Indeed, signaling that the United States would be prepared to marshal the international assistance needed for implementation could help to achieve a settlement.

Current U.S. policy nominally acknowledges the need, ultimately, for a negotiated settlement, and recent statements by some senior U.S. officials suggest that the level of interest in pursuing a settlement may be on the rise. However, actual policy execution is still heavily dominated by the military effort. A concerted and prioritized initiative to negotiate would be a

¹² For an excellent exploration of the challenges of countering corruption, see Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, *The Quest for Good Governance: How Societies Develop Control of Corruption*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015.

major foreign policy undertaking, requiring both clear political backing and significant diplomatic muscle. As yet, those requirements do not appear to be met.