

Research Paper

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Opportunity in Crisis

Navigating Afghanistan's Uncertain Future



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Summary and Recommendations

Afghanistan's future remains uncertain. After one of the longest and most ambitious interventions since the Second World War, peace and stability remain elusive. Much has been achieved but at a heavy price, and the sustainability of the gains made is in the balance. The world has an opportunity, if not a responsibility, to ensure that its investments pay a dividend – both for Afghans and for broader international security. Focused engagement could help stem the tide of poverty, political instability and violence. Disengagement could do the reverse.

Five key steps could make a major difference:

- An **international diplomatic drive, spearheaded by the United States and China** working in partnership, to bolster external support for Afghanistan, reduce regional tensions, especially between Afghanistan and Pakistan, and procure Taliban involvement in peace talks.
- **Unrelenting efforts by the Afghan government, in conjunction with the UN and international partners, to build a peace process** centred on structured, mediated dialogue with insurgents. It should be anchored in shared interests and include outreach to all elements of Afghan society, including women.
- The **formulation and execution of a plan by the Afghan government to fulfil its own reform commitments**, with clear prioritized goals to tackle corruption, build state effectiveness, create jobs and achieve fiscal sustainability.
- **Concerted action by the government to forge more inclusive politics and development**, involving efforts to strengthen electoral institutions, promote wide-ranging participation in politics and protect the space for local mobilization, especially for women and the younger generation.
- **Renewed commitment by Western and other donors to provide sustained and coordinated financial support** to Afghanistan's civilian and security sectors over the next decade, on the basis of a revitalized Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF). This should be reinforced by greater use of multilateral bodies as vehicles for strengthening adherence to international norms, building institutional capacities and enhancing delivery mechanisms.

This paper seeks to capture key insights and recommendations from the 'Opportunity in Crisis' project on Afghanistan, which covered three areas: politics and elections, reconciliation and the region, and human development. In each area there are both immense, complex challenges and opportunities.

Politics and elections

In Afghanistan, the viability and effectiveness of the national unity government are in question, democratic institutions are weak, and power is largely held by an elite on the basis of patronage, bargaining and violence. The electoral process is undermined by fraud, and there are pressures from a growing youth population. Yet, by voting in large numbers in 2014, the population demonstrated support for clear democratic politics and, in spite of the electoral crisis, the political system proved surprisingly resilient.

Looking ahead, the international community should provide enduring support for elections, and ensure a robust but measured international role in resolving disputes, respectful of Afghan sovereignty. Afghan and international policy-makers should institute measures to minimize and respond to fraud, support youth participation in politics, and move forward with political and institutional reform, including the de-concentration of power.

Reconciliation and the region

The armed conflict in Afghanistan is escalating, inflicting more civilian casualties than at any time since 2001, and causing massive displacement. The Afghan government cannot sustain its war-fighting effort, and there is deep mistrust between the warring parties. Yet the presence of a new president, the withdrawal of foreign troops, the convergence of interests in stability and changing regional dynamics all open up real possibilities for an Afghan-led peace process.

Afghan, regional and international policy-makers should vigorously seek to establish a peace process and overcome mistrust between the parties. They should prioritize effective facilitation and management of the process, the core of which should be dialogue between the Taliban and the Afghan government. This should form part of a broader, more inclusive process of national consultation and outreach. The process should be underpinned by a US–China partnership, build on convergent interests and look to secure regional backing, especially from Pakistan. Those leading the process should manage expectations and take a long-term approach, given the inevitable difficulties ahead.

Human development

Afghanistan faces chronic weaknesses in the provision of essential services. Agriculture and water conservancy have suffered from years of underinvestment, and unemployment is high and rising. Increasing violence is paralysing the economy and impeding development work, and international aid is in steady decline. Yet, if managed well, the decline in overseas aid could enable more coherent, prioritized and purposive international efforts to promote development. The new government could lead a reform agenda that builds the credibility, effectiveness and inclusivity of the state.

Afghan and international policy-makers should make the case for sustained international support to the country on the basis of the TMAF, and ensure that overseas aid promotes Afghan-owned and -led development. Key priorities are tackling corruption and creating political space for development. To enhance coherence, national ownership and accountability, greater use should be made of multilateral institutions and international trust funds. International and Afghan actors should take action to expand women's rights and opportunities, including by enabling local political mobilization. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could draw on lessons learned to deal with rising insecurity, and use innovative techniques for project management, monitoring and evaluation.

The above steps, by Afghan and international actors, could help Afghanistan navigate its multiple challenges. Yet the indispensable condition for success is enduring, collective determination and the political will to seize opportunities for a better, more stable future.

Introduction: Afghanistan in Transition

Afghanistan faced multiple challenges in 2014. The country experienced a controversial presidential election, a contraction of the economy, a widening fiscal gap, the winding-down of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and an increasingly lethal insurgency. At issue now is whether the country will be able to establish a path to stability as the tide of Western support recedes and foreign troops withdraw.

There are grounds for optimism. The presidential and provincial elections demonstrated a strong public interest in voting for Afghan political leaders. Despite severe fissures among the political elite, a national unity government was formed. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) were able to prevent the Taliban from seizing major population centres and key highways. Afghanistan's relationship with Pakistan improved significantly after Ashraf Ghani's inauguration as president, and China has encouraged Pakistan to support an Afghan peace process. Indeed, recent talks between Taliban figures and Afghan officials in Murree, near Islamabad, are an indicator of Pakistan's evolving approach. Furthermore, the international community at large has an interest in Afghanistan's future stability and has expressed support for its government.

Nevertheless, profound challenges remain. The Taliban-led insurgency remains powerful, well resourced and able to benefit from sanctuaries and support in Pakistan. The Taliban are launching more attacks on government forces than at any point since 2001, killing unprecedented numbers of soldiers and police, and are well positioned to make unilateral gains, especially in the south and southeast of the country and parts of the north.¹ Such high levels of violence call into question Ashraf Ghani's ambition to attract external investment and to turn Afghanistan into a regional trade and transit hub. The sharp drop in international military expenditure and reduction in overseas aid are placing further pressure on the country's economy, while low revenue rates severely limit the government's ability to invest in public services. Hundreds of thousands of young people are entering the Afghan job market every year, but there are insufficient opportunities for employment.

Many of these challenges are rooted in complex social, economic, political and regional dynamics. Drawing on expert research, analysis and interaction during a two-year project, this paper seeks to show how these challenges can be better understood and, while there are no panaceas, it sets out realistic and actionable policy recommendations. More broadly, it argues that building stability in Afghanistan will require focus, determination and sustained commitment on the part of the Afghan government and the international community. The temptation for Western policy-makers will be to walk away. We hope the ideas and proposals set out below explain why that would be the wrong thing to do. With sufficient focus and commitment, the right policies – even with fewer resources – could yield real progress on the road to stability.

The 'Opportunity in Crisis' project, directed by Michael Keating and Matt Waldman, focused on three key areas covered in this paper: (1) politics and elections, (2) reconciliation and the region, and (3) human development. Each section explores critiques of previous or existing policy, but places a strong emphasis on pathways ahead. The paper presents insights, ideas and options for Afghan and international decision-

¹ 'Afghanistan Quarterly Data Report, First Quarter 2015', International NGO Security Organisation, April 2015.

makers that emerged from the project's various publications and activities. It therefore draws heavily on a total of 10 policy briefings and four research papers commissioned over the course of the project, and on the observations and ideas generated by over 20 expert consultations and roundtable discussions convened in London, Kabul, Brussels, Oslo, Adelaide, Geneva and Washington, DC. Text boxes include summaries of some of these discussions, which involved policy-makers, diplomats, regional experts, academics, NGO personnel and civil society leaders. A fold-out timeline in the centre of the print version of this paper places the project outputs in the context of events in Afghanistan between 2013 and 2015.

Box 1: Fixing failed states: from theory to practice

President Ashraf Ghani, author of *Fixing Failed States*,^a discussed future challenges and opportunities for Afghanistan with Michael Keating at Chatham House on 4 December 2014. The following excerpts are taken from his comments at that event.

Politics and governing

'[A]ll processes of state formation are political and moral. You need a moral compass to put the country above yourself. That means you have to generate political capital, not political division.'

The government inherited 'both dysfunctionality and pockets of excellence'. 'Governing, unlike academic thinking, is relentless. Time does not wait for you.'

'Owning the problem is fundamental to solving it.'

Security

'Attacks on civilians are a sign of weakness, they are not a sign of strength.'

'We have a national consensus on peace as our priority.' Violence will not 'detract us from the path of peace'.

Aid and the economy

'The economy got distorted because ISAF/NATO became the largest economic actor in the country. ... A lot of cash came but it did not become capital.'

'I will be taking a direct managerial role in economic issues and issues of regional integration, for which I have spent a lifetime preparing. ... The key to prosperity is not in foreign aid, it's in regional economic integration. That's what we are focused on.'

The region

'We are strong advocates of a regional compact on peace, on stability and prosperity.'

With respect to Afghanistan and Pakistan: 'Do we become the cul-de-sac that stops Asia's economic integration, or do we become the linchpin of this economic integration? ... It is essential ... to our mutual security, to Asia's future and to global security that we share a common understanding of the problem and reach common solutions.'

Women

'Rule of law is the fundamental part of empowerment of the women, so the rights that they have, both under Shari'a and under civil and criminal law, are accorded to them.'

'But what is really fundamental is economic empowerment of the women. ... A lot of violence against women unfortunately is on economic grounds. Poverty breeds violence. So we need to tackle this. Urban women, particularly poor urban women, are the most vulnerable.'

Popularity

'I'm not elected to be popular; I'm elected to be effective.'

^a Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World*, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Politics and Elections

This section considers the presidential and provincial council elections which took place in 2014 – including Afghans' decision to vote, their experience on polling day, the impasse following the run-off and the international role in brokering a political deal. It also considers longer-term, structural challenges to Afghanistan's democracy and the impact of the country's changing demography.

The decision to vote

In the months leading up to the April 2014 presidential and provincial council elections, there were valid concerns over an anticipated low electoral turnout. Voter turnout in Afghanistan had been decreasing significantly since 2004.² The experience of widespread corruption during the 2004, 2005, 2009 and 2010 polls contributed significantly to the perception among Afghans that elections are manipulated by the political elite.³ In 2014 worsening security conditions and widely publicized efforts to manipulate the electoral process could easily have deterred citizens from participating.⁴ This was compounded by fears of backroom deals and international meddling.

Nevertheless, Afghans showed a high level of enthusiasm in voting during the 2014 elections. Research commissioned by Chatham House throws light on why, despite concerns for their safety, Afghans in urban areas decided to vote. The research, led by Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, shows that on the whole, Afghans were voting not because they embraced democracy or wanted to see a particular kind of government, but rather because they wanted to ensure that a new government was in fact established and that this happened through elections.⁵ They saw voting as the best way of ensuring a peaceful handover of power and paving the way to a secure rather than violent future.⁶

Election day

The high turnout in the elections was attributable to a range of factors, including the preparatory work and organization of the Independent Election Commission (IEC) and ANSF, and the decision of insurgent groups in some areas not to disrupt the poll.⁷ However, a significant factor was the enthusiasm of voters, reflecting both local and national concerns. As Chatham House researchers concluded, the poll partly reflected the importance that Afghans attach to provincial council elections,⁸ while at the same time it 'represented a rejection of both insurgent attempts to disrupt the election and the attempts of existing Afghan elites, particularly the regime of President Hamid Karzai, to consolidate their grasp on power'.⁹

² Carina Perelli and Scott Smith, *Anticipating and Responding to Fraud in the 2014 Afghan Elections*, Chatham House Briefing, February 2014, p. 5.

³ Noah Coburn, *Looking Beyond 2014: Elections in Afghanistan's Evolving Political Context*, Chatham House Briefing, February 2014, p. 4.

⁴ Perelli and Smith, *Anticipating and Responding to Fraud*, p. 5. See also 'The 2014 Elections in Afghanistan', Chatham House Expert Consultation Summary, February 2014.

⁵ Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, *Why Vote in 2014? Afghan Views of the Elections*, Chatham House Research Paper, April 2014, p. 2.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷ Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, *Electoral Turnout in Afghanistan: An Act of Defiance?*, Chatham House Research Paper, April 2014; and *Not 'Legitimate' Yet: The Need for Continued Commitment after the Afghan Elections*, Chatham House Research Paper, May 2014. See also Antonio Giustozzi and Silab Mangal, *Violence, the Taliban and Afghanistan's 2014 Elections*, United States Institute of Peace, December 2014.

⁸ Larson and Coburn, *Not 'Legitimate' Yet*, p. 2.

⁹ Larson and Coburn, *Electoral Turnout in Afghanistan*, p. 2.

Post hoc reporting and investigations indicated that electoral fraud had taken place on a massive scale. However, Afghan voters generally described their voting experience in positive terms, and had fewer concerns about fraud than in the previous presidential election of 2009. Positive attitudes towards the vote were reinforced by several other factors: the perception that elections were Afghan-led (albeit funded by donors); vigorous candidate campaigning; better public and voter awareness; greater voter involvement, particularly by women, in the election process; improved security; a better range of anti-fraud measures; and better quality of electoral materials.¹⁰

The only criticism, mentioned principally by respondents from minority ethnic groups, was that ballot papers ran out in various polling stations. Even this, however, was generally seen as a consequence of high turnout and contrasts with 2009, where the same problem was often seen as an intentional effort to marginalize certain groups.¹¹

Run-off, impasse and power-sharing deal

The first round of voting led to a second-round run-off in June 2014 between the leading candidates, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. Research conducted by Chatham House showed that voters were far more concerned about irregularities and corruption in the second round than in the first. Indeed, with more at stake, it seems the electoral authorities did too little to prevent fraud and political manipulation.¹² The results were bitterly contested by the candidates. Even the vote-counting, complaints and auditing processes were mired in problems and soon gave way to political bargaining between the respective camps, with international mediation.

The record of international involvement did not give rise to high expectations. During the 2004–05 elections many foreign actors chose to look the other way when faced with irregularities, in part because of wishful thinking, and in part as a result of political calculation. After the 2009 presidential elections the international community, led by the United States, played a critical role in resolving the ensuing crisis, but was said to have resorted to a mix of cajoling, threats and inconsistently applied ‘red lines’.¹³

In 2014, after months of deadlock, the US played a key role in mediating a deal between the two leading candidates, leading to the formation of a government of national unity. Under the deal, Ashraf Ghani was declared the winner and inaugurated as president, while Abdullah Abdullah assumed a newly created post of chief executive officer. Thus Afghanistan avoided political upheaval, and witnessed the first peaceful transfer of power in its recent history.

Nevertheless, there are questions about the long-term viability of the power-sharing arrangement. It took over six months for the cabinet to be formed, and political disputes appeared to be impeding the government’s ability to implement its agenda. Moreover, many Afghans question whether it was their vote, fraud or political bargaining, with international mediation, that determined the outcome of the election. Thus the credibility of elections in Afghanistan has once again been called into question.¹⁴

¹⁰ ‘What Happened during the Afghan Presidential Elections and What’s Next?’, Chatham House Expert Consultation Summary, May 2014.

¹¹ Larson and Coburn, *Not ‘Legitimate’ Yet*, p. 4.

¹² Noah Coburn, *Afghanistan: The 2014 Vote and the Troubled Future of Elections*, Chatham House Briefing, March 2015, pp. 2–3.

¹³ Perelli and Smith, *Anticipating and Responding to Fraud*, p. 8.

¹⁴ Coburn, *Afghanistan: The 2014 Vote*.

Structural challenges

Looking beyond the specific problems associated with the 2014 elections, there are longer-term, structural challenges for electoral democracy in Afghanistan. These stem from the country's political history and institutions, and its changing demography.

In a Chatham House briefing,¹⁵ Noah Coburn attempts to put the 2014 elections in context, describing Afghanistan's chequered electoral history, with periods of political liberalization followed by reactionary responses, the suppression of opposition and violent upheaval. Unsurprisingly, the rising instability over the past decade, and generally unfavourable electoral experiences of many of Afghanistan's neighbours (especially Iran and Central Asian states), have contributed to scepticism among Afghans about the potential of democracy to pave the way to stability.

Unsurprisingly, the rising instability over the past decade, and generally unfavourable electoral experiences of many of Afghanistan's neighbours (especially Iran and Central Asian states), have contributed to scepticism among Afghans about the potential of democracy to pave the way to stability.

Moreover, Afghanistan's political system is characterized by the absence of an established democratic tradition, weak institutions and the lack of popular, organized and effective political parties. The upshot is limited political pluralism and an electoral process which to some degree is a continuation, by institutionalized means, of the truce established among power-holders during the Bonn negotiations in 2001.¹⁶ As Carina Perelli and Scott Smith discuss in a Chatham House briefing, in this sense elections function as a mechanism of conflict resolution.¹⁷ They typically involve 'patronage, political fragmentation, bargaining and manipulation, violence and fraud', but are arguably preferable to alternative means to determine the allocation of power, especially through the use of force.¹⁸ Still, the electoral process needs to have the buy-in of both the elite and the population at large. This depends on adherence to a complex amalgam of rules, conventions and expectations, which, if transgressed, call into question the legitimacy of the outcome, both for the winners and for the system as a whole. This, in turn, can prove to be a catalyst for violent upheaval – a prospect that seems to have been narrowly avoided in the 2014 contest. Thus, looking ahead, the integrity, credibility and resilience of Afghanistan's emerging democratic institutions will be an essential element of preserving stability, especially given pressures from Afghanistan's changing population.

The past decade has seen the emergence of a new generation of youth – over half the Afghan population is under the age of 20.¹⁹ A significant number of these young people are educated, concentrated in urban areas, and therefore 'more exposed to global trends, better networked both with one another and with civil society organizations, private-sector small enterprises and universities, many of which have relied on foreign support'.²⁰ Yet many of these educated youth

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Thomas Ruttig, 'Pluralistic within Limits but not Democratic: Afghanistan's Political Landscape before the 2014 Elections', Afghanistan Analysts Network, 24 October 2013, <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/pluralistic-within-limits-but-not-democratic-afghanistans-political-landscape-before-the-2014-elections>.

¹⁷ Perelli and Smith, *Anticipating and Responding to Fraud*, pp. 3–6.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

¹⁹ Coburn, *Looking Beyond 2014*, p. 5.

²⁰ Perelli and Smith, *Anticipating and Responding to Fraud*, p. 5.

are unable to find jobs. In addition, a marginalized underclass of poorly educated unemployed youth has also emerged, especially in the fringes of cities, provincial towns and districts.

These young people have few, if any, connections to the generation of political leaders which rose to prominence in the 1970s to 1980s, especially during the jihad against the Soviet Union.²¹ Yet by and large, this older generation of elites continues to dominate the country's politics, principally through patronage networks. Some youth groups have taken steps to mobilize politically, but others have been co-opted or curtailed by the older generation of leaders. However, the absence of effective political parties, and viable channels to engage in political life, could have a profound effect on the extent to which young people buy in to newly established democratic institutions. The experience and preferences of this generation will undoubtedly shape Afghanistan's political future.

Ways forward

Provide strong and continued international support for elections

Broadly, international support for democracy in Afghanistan has been characterized by unrealistic expectations, intermittent bursts of interest and resources, poor coordination and mixed messaging. Realistic, concerted and consistent international support for electoral institutions, over the long term, could help to create a credible electoral regime.

Build and fund electoral institutions

Capacity-building programmes for the IEC and Electoral Complaints Commission (ECC) are crucial in order to create a body of experienced election officials who are able to credibly manage, oversee and monitor elections. These institutions, and local monitoring and watchdog organizations, should be fully funded by donors. However, the IEC and ECC require not only technical capacity but also political will, which was arguably lacking in the 2014 run-off. Outside support should be used to encourage their officials to demonstrate independence, professionalism and integrity.

Ensure a robust but measured international role in resolving disputes

At a political level, external powers should do what they can to uphold the credibility of elections – while recognizing the paradox that their very involvement can, of itself, undermine the legitimacy of the eventual outcome. In helping to resolve disputes, they should be wary of actual or perceived meddling, which can undermine trust in the electoral process and bolster insurgent narratives about the violation of Afghan sovereignty. To avoid electoral disputes, they should urge collective agreement among Afghan political rivals, ahead of future elections, on what is acceptable and unacceptable practice in campaigning and process.²² The UN should build on what is generally seen by Afghans as its positive role in helping to resolve the 2014 electoral crisis, ensuring a rigorous commitment to fairness and impartiality.

²¹ Larson and Coburn, *Not 'Legitimate' Yet*, p. 8.

²² Perelli and Smith, *Anticipating and Responding to Fraud*, p. 10.

Institute measures to minimize and respond to fraud

Strenuous efforts must be made to minimize electoral fraud and to acquire a full understanding of fraudulent practices established during the 2014 presidential campaigns, as past experience suggests they could well be reactivated for parliamentary elections expected in 2015.²³ Election officials and external monitors should be no less vigorous in identifying and combating fraud in anticipated parliamentary or district elections than they were during the presidential elections. Both could be highly contested, and have a major impact on local political dynamics, access to resources, accountability and overall faith in the democratic process.

Efforts should be devoted to acquiring a full understanding of fraudulent practices established during the 2014 presidential campaigns, as past experience suggests they could well be reactivated for parliamentary elections expected in 2015.

All feasible steps must be taken to promote transparency and to identify, expose and remedy electoral fraud. Yet in judging the magnitude of fraud and the appropriate response, national and international election officials must apply the rule that the sum total of irregularities should not exceed the difference of votes between two candidates necessary to determine who wins the seat.

Support youth participation

Responding to the growing youth population, the Afghan government should take measures to promote awareness among young people of their democratic rights; encourage their registration as voters; ensure they are freely able to organize, mobilize or campaign politically, including in political parties; and promote their regular engagement with officials.

Institute political reform

The political deal that created the national unity government envisages the calling of a Loya Jirga (grand council) to debate amendments to the Afghan constitution to create the post of prime minister, but it could also be more far-reaching. Afghanistan's highly centralized presidential system has tended to reinforce political patronage networks and suppress local political accountability. Afghan political leaders should consider taking steps to allocate more powers to Afghanistan's parliament, and provide for a de-concentration of political and fiscal powers to the provincial or district level. However, the timing and scope of the Loya Jirga will need to be carefully considered in the light of the prevailing political and security situation.

²³ Political networks that organized ballot-stuffing in the 2009 presidential elections were instrumental in effecting fraud and manipulation in the 2010 parliamentary elections – see Coburn, *Looking Beyond 2014*, p. 4.

Box 2: Changing the narrative on Afghanistan

This box includes excerpts from the following three expert consultations that covered the issue of the narrative on Afghanistan:

- 'Making Sense of Afghanistan: Competing Narratives and their Impact on Future Policy' – London, April 2014
- 'Afghanistan: Aid and Reality: Is It Time for a New Approach?' – London, October 2014
- 'Changing the Odds: Achieving Stability in Afghanistan' – London, March 2015

There has been no consensus on the political narrative about Afghanistan in Western countries since 2001, and the public is confused about whether the intervention has made these countries and Afghanistan any safer. Policy-makers have tended to choose the narrative that fits their purposes best at any given time, and this has shaped each country's policy-making in relation to Afghanistan.

Recent narratives in the US have revolved around the belief that success is not possible. This is linked to commitment fatigue, a focus on withdrawal timelines, the transition to Afghan forces and – under President Obama – a prioritization of nation-building within the US itself.

There is a need to articulate and communicate a new narrative on Afghanistan. Divergent narratives of 'job done' or 'wasted efforts' are detrimental to securing the long-term international support the country needs. After 14 years of engagement with development results that are both reversible and far from commensurate with the amounts spent, it is not surprising that support for Afghanistan is diminishing in donor countries. The unfavourable narrative also reflects the Western failure to identify and tackle the root causes of insecurity, and the tendency to overlook Afghan priorities.

Afghans themselves are best placed to counter adverse narratives, and to project the image of their country as one determined, despite formidable challenges, to achieve peace, human security and justice. The administration of President Ghani has an opportunity to reassure neighbouring states, institute reforms and underscore the importance of continued Western assistance. Domestically, the government needs to convey a sense of action and urgency to secure Afghan support for expenditure cutbacks, anti-corruption efforts and difficult policy reforms, while sustaining national unity.

President Ghani has a political and economic vision – for the country to 'realize self-reliance' – around which regional cooperation and continued Western support can be mobilized. But to be credible, this must be owned by the national unity government and 'align with reality' for Afghans, whose needs are practical and immediate.

The depth, reach and vibrancy of Afghan civil society and media are among the country's most remarkable achievements since 2001 and could play a crucial role in creating space for a new narrative. However, progress remains vulnerable, and donors should support the development of civil society and the media as part of a broader nation-building agenda, rather than focusing only on state-building.

Such efforts could also help to pave the way for a dialogue on peace and reconciliation. Space needs to be created for an Afghan-led peace process, in which Afghans define the concept of reconciliation and consider what it should and should not involve. Constructing and implementing confidence-building measures will be critical for this to be successful. Afghan and international partners should develop short- and long-term measures to help promote a genuine, open and inclusive dialogue about how the conflict can be resolved and about the country's future.

Reconciliation and the Region

This section considers topics connected to the establishment of a peace process, often referred to as 'reconciliation' – in particular, the rationale for a peace process; challenges and opportunities; the Taliban; mediating and managing the process; interest mapping; and regional engagement.

Rationale for a peace process

There is a powerful rationale for exploring the possibilities for a negotiated peace. Afghanistan's conflict is escalating and government forces are suffering losses that are not sustainable: on average, a staggering 680 Afghan police and soldiers are being killed every month.²⁴ The conflict also has increasingly severe consequences for civilians. There were over 10,000 civilian deaths and injuries during 2014, the highest level recorded since 2001,²⁵ and the number of civilian casualties during the first four months of 2015 was 16 per cent higher than during the same period in 2014.²⁶ Over 140,000 Afghans were displaced by the conflict in 2014, an 8 per cent rise on the figure for 2013, and there are now over 900,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) across the country. The conflict is impeding trade, investment and economic rehabilitation. With low revenues and decreasing aid, the government simply cannot afford to fight the war against an enemy that has secure foreign sanctuaries and is growing in strength.

After years of conflict, the overwhelming majority of the Afghan people yearn for peace and stability. Today, few analysts believe – as many did in the mid- to late 2000s – that there is a military solution to the conflict. As Caroline Hartzell points out in a briefing for Chatham House, it is less costly, economically and in terms of human lives, to terminate intrastate conflicts through negotiation than by waiting for one party to prevail militarily.²⁷ Indeed, the death toll of wars ended through negotiations is roughly half that of conflicts ended by a military victory. New analysis suggests that negotiated settlements are also more likely to produce a stable peace, and the recurrence of violence in such cases is likely to be much less deadly than in the aftermath of an outright victory.²⁸

Challenges and opportunities

The priority in Afghanistan is the establishment of a peace process at the heart of which is a structured, facilitated dialogue between the main parties about the issues of contention.²⁹ The obstacles to establishing such a process – let alone peace itself – are immense. This is in part attributable to the delay of over nine years between the initiation of US military efforts against the Taliban on 7 October 2001 and the first high-level meeting between the two parties on 28 November

²⁴ Joseph Goldstein, 'Afghan Forces Struggle to Maintain Stalemate', *New York Times*, 22 July 2015; 'Afghanistan Quarterly Data Report, First Quarter 2015', International NGO Security Organisation, April 2015; and Mujib Mashal, Joseph Goldstein and Jawad Sukhanyar, 'Afghans Form Militias and Call on Warlords to Battle Taliban', *New York Times*, 24 May 2015.

²⁵ '2014 Annual Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict', United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, February 2015, p. 1.

²⁶ 'UNAMA condemns killing of 17 civilians by Taliban', Press Statement, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 14 May 2015.

²⁷ Caroline A. Hartzell, *A Comparative Perspective on an Afghan Peace Process: Why, When, Who and What?*, Chatham House Briefing, December 2014, p. 2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

2010. Even then, it was not until 2012–13 that US officials dropped their opposition to negotiations. By that time the Taliban, with their own internal differences on the issue, were deeply sceptical of US and Afghan government intentions, and American troops were in the midst of rapid withdrawal, both of which acted as a disincentive for talks.

Mistrust between the parties has been accentuated by a range of factors, including by the use of talks as an adjunct to a military strategy – to weaken and divide the enemy – rather than as efforts in good faith to reach an end to the conflict. This has resulted in a lack of clarity about the roles and mandates of interlocutors; multiple ad hoc tracks lacking coordination, structure and facilitation; and an absence of an agreed agenda and ground rules, including those relating to confidentiality. Persistent leaks – including as recently as February 2015 – have hampered progress.

Furthermore, the parties to the conflict do not perceive themselves to be in a stalemate, with the Taliban making incremental gains not only in the south and east of the country, but also in the north and west. There continues to be a huge trust deficit between the parties; a number of leaders on all sides see advantages in a continuation of the conflict; and spoilers are ready and able to undermine any process. There are growing concerns that Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) may be establishing a foothold in Afghanistan. The evidence is unclear as to whether this is opportunistic, amounting to a rebranding by insurgent groups in order to attract attention and support, or whether ISIS serves as a new vehicle for radicalism, particularly among young people. In either case it has the potential to hamper constructive dialogue.

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Despite these challenges, there are opportunities to improve the prospects for peace. The withdrawal of foreign troops – there are only some 12,000 remaining – removes a driving impetus of the insurgency. The Taliban have always demanded their withdrawal before talks. The departure of President Hamid Karzai also removes an obstacle to talks, given that he was excoriated and deeply mistrusted by the Taliban. Establishing a peace process has been the top priority for President Ghani, who made early visits to Pakistan, China and Saudi Arabia to secure their support for a process. Indeed, his inauguration was followed by a marked improvement in Pakistan's relations with Afghanistan, attributable to his cooperation and outreach, China's influence, and increasing awareness in Pakistan of the domestic threat from Islamist militants. True, the benefits of President Ghani's outreach have yet to materialize, and the Afghanistan–Pakistan relationship is once again under strain, but there is potential for progress. Talks held between Taliban figures and Afghan officials near Islamabad in early July 2015 may be indicative of a more constructive approach by Pakistan. Broadly, stability in Afghanistan is in the common interest of neighbours and regional powers, including China, Pakistan, India, Iran, Russia and Central Asian states. Many of these states have tended to take a zero-sum approach to regional geopolitics, but they stand to gain from cooperation in a range of areas.

In addition, over the past few years and even in recent months Taliban representatives or individuals affiliated with the movement have participated in 'Track II' and pre-negotiation meetings with Afghan political figures, leaders of ethnic groups, Afghan women and foreign diplomats. Though limited in impact, these initiatives have helped to build a level of mutual understanding between participants, and have contributed to wider interest in the pursuit of political dialogue.

The Taliban

Although the Taliban is only one element of the armed opposition, and is itself factionalized, it is the largest, best organized and most lethal, and therefore the most important to understand.³⁰ It is difficult to discern specific Taliban positions or objectives: the movement has articulated the goal of establishing an 'Islamic system', although this is not clearly defined. The Taliban projects a narrative of military victory and is focused on maintaining the armed struggle. However, the movement is less hostile to negotiations than it was a few years ago, and increasingly views political activities in tandem with military efforts. It has not ruled out negotiations, and indeed there are elements that favour this approach. A key question is how to increase the relative strength of those elements.

The movement's unity is disputed, with some observers pointing to its cohesion and others identifying rivalry between competing factions. For instance, the Haqqani faction, led by former *mujahideen* leader Jalaluddin Haqqani and widely regarded as the deadliest faction of the Taliban, is seen as semi-autonomous and closer to Pakistan's military intelligence service, the ISI. However, the Taliban continues to be highly effective, despite its limited base of support. The Taliban leadership has exercised command and control over the rank and file, although this appears to be weakening over time and is strained by the growing presence of militants affiliated with ISIS. The movement is supported by Pakistan's ISI, but the nature of the relationship is complex and opaque: the Taliban are sensitive to Pakistan's demands but not entirely in hock to them.

Spoilers and splinter groups already exist within the Taliban and more may emerge, led by mid-level commanders who may believe they have the most to lose from peace. Afghans whose interests depend on patronage networks or illicit activities may also attempt to derail talks, as may regional powers if they believe their interests have not been taken into account and secured in the course of a political process. Thus no peace process is likely to bring about a complete end to the fighting.

Mediation and management of the process

Ad hoc, intermittent dialogue between the warring parties has lacked structure, direction and facilitation. The complexity of the conflict and deep mistrust between the parties indicate that any process is likely to be lengthy, and that a third-party mediator or facilitator will be required to help move the process forward. Mediation can take a number of forms; one option is a single mediator supported by an experienced team. At the outset, however, the parties must be consulted to see what form of support they believe is appropriate, and to gauge expectations of any international role. One of a number of different options may be for the UN secretary-general to use his 'good offices' mandate, as he has in other conflicts, to appoint an individual to explore, on a discreet basis, the possibilities for a peace process.

A key task is identifying and building trust with credible, empowered interlocutors on the various sides. An Afghan government negotiating team may need to include representation from other political factions and would require direct access to the Afghan president. At the core of the

³⁰ This section draws on Matt Waldman and Matthew Wright, *Who Wants What: Mapping the Parties' Interests in the Afghanistan Conflict*, Chatham House Research Paper, July 2014, pp. 21–24; and 'Colloquium on a Peace Process in Afghanistan', Chatham House Expert Colloquium Summary, 24–25 June 2014.

process must be an intra-Afghan dialogue, but other parties with key interests at stake, such as Pakistan, need to be included.

A process will need to be quietly and carefully organized, and will require agreement on the framework for talks. Care should be taken to manage the speed and sequencing of the process. Premature ceasefires, for instance, can easily break down, thereby undermining trust. A balance should be struck between transparency and confidentiality: some information must be shared widely, but many other peace processes have required a level of secrecy to succeed. A fine balance must also be reached on the scope of the process: it must be inclusive, but not so broad that it becomes unmanageable. Given the predominance of male leaders on all sides, special efforts must be made to involve Afghan women, as well as young people. A location for high-level talks could be agreed by the parties, preferably easily accessible from Afghanistan.

Analysts agree that it will be important to reinforce high-level talks with an inclusive process of consultation and outreach with all elements of Afghan society. This should involve a bottom-up, patchwork approach drawing on existing, local-level institutions and initiatives for conflict resolution. As Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn argue in a briefing for Chatham House, a precondition for a successful process is establishing a 'baseline of trust' and a broad base of support for talks.³¹ They call for the establishment of a team of experienced national and international facilitators, supported by scholars, elders and others. Under the aegis of the UN, these individuals would work at the local level to build relationships with relevant groups, facilitate communication, assess the source of local conflicts and grievances, and suggest ways forward.³² These activities could help to create an enabling environment and momentum for political reconciliation.

Interest mapping

The principal parties to the Afghanistan conflict have a range of core interests – ranging from political, geostrategic and economic interests to social, cultural and reputational concerns. An understanding of these interests, especially their relative importance to the parties, and whether they converge or diverge, should inform any future efforts to establish a peace process. Such understanding could help identify and address cases where a party's positions do not align with its fundamental interests, or where a party's judgments about others' interests are mistaken, thereby creating barriers to dialogue.

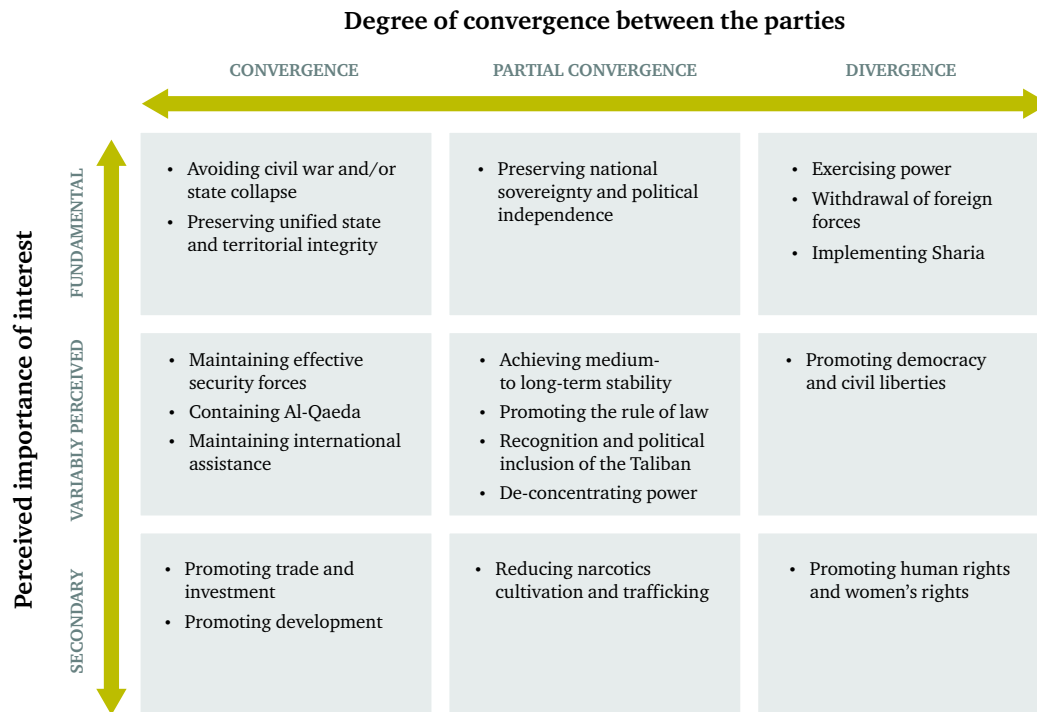
A research paper for Chatham House by Matt Waldman and Matthew Wright explores these interests, and finds that there is sufficient convergence of the parties' interests, often obscured by belligerent rhetoric, to suggest that some form of political accommodation is possible, yet ample divergence and distrust between them to make this difficult to accomplish.³³

³¹ Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *Rebooting a Political Settlement: Engagement and Mediation after the Afghan Elections*, Chatham House Briefing, July 2014.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³³ Waldman and Wright, *Who Wants What*.

Figure 1: Map of the parties’ interests by perceived importance and degree of convergence



Source: Waldman and Wright, *Who Wants What*, p. 10.

As indicated in Figure 1, there is apparent convergence of interests between most of the parties, including, to some extent, the Taliban, in terms of avoiding full-scale civil war or state collapse, preserving Afghanistan’s territorial integrity, and, over the longer term, maintaining effective national security forces, containing extremists and securing continued international assistance for the country. There is at least some convergence in other areas, such as preserving Afghanistan’s sovereignty and political independence.

However, there are interests that diverge, such as those relating to the exercise of power and the presence of foreign forces (though this has declined in salience), and to the Taliban’s agenda for the strict application of sharia. There are also certain interests that the parties’ leaders do not regard as fundamental but that are important to the Afghan population – including interests where there is divergence between the parties, such as ensuring respect for human rights and women’s rights, or those where there is convergence, such as promoting development or strengthening trade and investment.³⁴

The complex web of the parties’ interests and objectives reinforces the case for effective mediation or facilitation, informed by knowledge of these interests, the dynamics between the parties and the sources of leverage and influence over them. The risk that the population’s interests will be neglected in any peace process suggests that it must involve representatives of Afghan society; indeed, any future mediator should develop strategies not only to overcome differences between the parties but also to protect the interests of the Afghan population. Peace may require compromises, but it is unlikely to be sustainable or just if it does not reflect the interests and aspirations of ordinary Afghans.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 2.

Regional engagement

The political transition to a new presidency, the relative resilience of the state and the withdrawal of international forces all open up the possibility of greater regional engagement in Afghanistan. Since the announcement of the departure of foreign troops in 2011, Afghanistan has sought to effect regional confidence-building measures through the 'Heart of Asia' process. It has conducted a range of trilateral and quadrilateral dialogues on regional cooperation; and, most recently, the president has championed the idea of Afghanistan as a trade and transit hub. Regional states undoubtedly stand to benefit from Afghanistan's stability: there is a strong case for developing its role in connecting energy-rich Central Asia with energy-poor South Asia, as well as for regional investment in the extraction of Afghanistan's minerals.

Successful regional engagement is to a large degree contingent on the resolution of Afghanistan's core conflict, which itself requires the support of key regional states. Most of the countries of the region lack the capacity, leverage, legitimacy or political will to mediate in this conflict.

However, as Gareth Price explains in a Chatham House briefing, there are numerous challenges in forging a constructive regional approach to Afghanistan.³⁵ The country's regional initiatives have generally had limited impact, and growing insecurity makes transit and investment aspirations improbable over the short to medium term. And while Afghanistan may consider itself at the 'heart of Asia', it is also at the fringes of South Asia, Central Asia and the Middle East, with their existing multilateral organizations such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC),³⁶ the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)³⁷ and the Arab League. This reinforces Afghanistan's marginalization and works against coordinated multilateral action. These organizations have no track record of effective engagement on security issues, are hampered by mistrust between members, and cover regions that are themselves among the world's least connected. In fact, their member states are concerned about 'spillover' and the adverse effects of increased connectivity with Afghanistan, not least in terms of drug-trafficking, extremists and refugees. Individually, regional states have also tended to subordinate their relationship with Afghanistan to other purposes; in particular, Pakistan has seen Afghanistan through the lens of its latent geopolitical conflict with India, while Iran has viewed it through the prism of its relationship with the United States.³⁸

Moreover, as Price points out, successful regional engagement is to a large degree contingent on the resolution of Afghanistan's core conflict, which itself requires the support of key regional states. Most of the countries of the region lack the capacity, leverage, legitimacy or political will to mediate in this conflict. Pakistan's long-standing relationship with the Afghan Taliban means it will be unable to mediate, but its role will nevertheless be critical. The Pakistani military's increasing concern about the threat posed by the Pakistani Taliban, including fears that it could benefit from sanctuaries in Afghanistan, could help bring about genuine cooperation with the Afghan government on establishing a political process that includes the Afghan Taliban. Pakistan's geopolitical approach does appear to be changing, yet the nature and degree of the shift remain in question.

³⁵ Gareth Price, *Afghanistan and its Neighbours: Forging Regional Engagement*, Chatham House Briefing, May 2015.

³⁶ SAARC's members are Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

³⁷ The SCO's members are China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

³⁸ Gareth Price, *Afghanistan and its Neighbours*, p. 2.

China has a significant and growing interest in Afghanistan's stability, given concerns about Islamist militancy in Xinjiang autonomous region, which is adjacent to the border, and future opportunities for mineral extraction. Over the longer term, China also has an interest in expanding its geopolitical influence in Central Asia, especially as the Western presence recedes, and in averting any confrontation between Pakistan, its key regional ally, and India. China has steadily expanded its diplomatic engagement with Afghanistan, including meeting with the Taliban, and has recently spoken strongly in favour of political reconciliation.³⁹ Given China's strong political and economic ties to Pakistan – where it recently pledged to invest \$46 billion – it is well placed to help bring about that country's support for an Afghan peace process.⁴⁰

Ways forward

Make vigorous efforts to establish a peace process

Given the scale of human suffering, economic costs of war and risks of escalating conflict, along with Taliban advances, Afghan political leaders, with coherent international diplomatic backing, should work vigorously to establish a peace process. The short-term goal should be to establish a structured, facilitated dialogue between the main parties about the issues of contention. They should act with urgency, but prepare for a long-term process and not expect immediate results.

Overcome mistrust

A top priority is to establish trust between the Taliban and the Afghan government, and mutual seriousness about finding an end to the conflict. These efforts should build on the presence of a new president with credibility, a government with a broad mandate, and the withdrawal of foreign forces.

Engage the Taliban and contain spoilers

Rigorous efforts should be made to acquire a better understanding of the Taliban, especially its interests and goals. Strategies should be developed to enhance the relative influence of pragmatists, increase Taliban willingness to engage, and manage or contain inevitable spoilers.

Ensure effective facilitation and management

Afghan and international officials should consult widely, including with the Taliban, to consider the appointment of a facilitator to help establish dialogue. Facilitation could take a number of forms, but will require a robust, highly capable and experienced team with, at the very least, the support of UN personnel. The team's mandate and mission should be endorsed by the UN secretary-general and Security Council. A key task will be identifying and building rapport with credible, empowered interlocutors. Sequencing must be carefully managed. Agreeing on a mutually acceptable location (or locations) for high-level talks, an initial agenda and ground rules, including confidentiality, will be critical to early success.

³⁹ Waldman and Wright, *Who Wants What*, pp. 29–30.

⁴⁰ Gareth Price, *Afghanistan and its Neighbours*, p. 7.

Ensure inclusivity

The core of the process should be an intra-Afghan dialogue but other key parties, especially Pakistan, must be included. Decision-makers should ensure that the process as a whole goes beyond dialogue between the Afghan government and Taliban, so that it involves consultation, outreach and trust-building at the local level. All elements of Afghan society, including women and youth, must be included.

Build on convergent interests

Decision-makers should ensure that any process is informed by a deep understanding not only of the parties' positions, but also of their fundamental interests, especially key areas of convergence. To ensure the legitimacy and sustainability of any eventual negotiated outcome, special attention should be given to protecting and promoting the interests of the Afghan population.

Secure regional support for a peace process

Afghan and international decision-makers should manage expectations with regard to constructive regional engagement in Afghanistan. However, decision-makers should capitalize on opportunities arising from broad international support for building stability in the country, Pakistan's changing posture and the potential for China to play a greater role in support of a peace process. The US, in particular, should seek to develop a strong partnership within China to manage long-standing regional tensions and rivalries.

Take a more responsible approach to continued engagement

Those involved in any process should keep in mind the following guiding considerations:⁴¹

- Take a long-term perspective – the process is likely to take several years to generate results – but act with urgency and decisively to seize opportunities.
- Move forward at local, national, regional and international levels.
- Ensure sustained personal engagement between interlocutors.
- Where necessary, seek to place pressure on the parties – but do not over-rely on pressure. Ultimately, trust will be the foundation of a successful process.
- Consider confidence-building measures – but ensure that they are achievable and do actually build trust.
- Ensure framing does not discourage involvement, and manage expectations. Be ambitious enough to generate interest, but do not encourage inflated expectations.
- Balance transparency with confidentiality, and inclusivity with manageability.
- Identify potential spoilers on all sides and develop strategies for managing them.

⁴¹ van Linschoten and Kuehn, *Rebooting a Political Settlement*, pp. 5–6.

Box 3: Lessons learned

This box presents excerpts on lessons learned from the international experience in Afghanistan, drawing on two 'Opportunity in Crisis' expert consultations:

- 'Afghanistan: Aid and Reality – Is It Time for a New Approach?' – London, October 2014
- 'State Strengthening in Afghanistan' – Washington, DC, March 2015, organized in collaboration with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and Stanford University

Delivery of aid

Lessons must be learned from the multitude of errors in aid efforts in Afghanistan: false assumptions, lack of attention to sustainability, the bypassing of national systems, inconsistent use of national capacities, and overambitious state-building expectations not based on Afghan reality.

The international approach to Afghanistan's development has largely been incoherent and disjointed, disconnected from Afghan society, hindered by short-termism and lacking an overarching strategy. Western political and security objectives have distorted established development practice and contributed to unrealistic goals that have rarely been set in response to Afghan needs. The predominance of military objectives also contributed to the re-empowerment of predatory power-brokers and delegitimized the authority of the state from the citizens' perspective.

International actors should coordinate effectively, and encourage Afghan ownership, including of the reform agenda. Building state institutions and tackling endemic corruption require domestic political will and long-term international backing. International partners should promote monitoring and accountability systems that foster capacity development and institutional learning.

Long-term assistance

Afghanistan's long-term sustainment needs are a consequence of systems put in place by the international community itself. Better planning is required to reduce fiscal dependency. In the past, sharp reductions in aid have contributed to the fall of Afghan governments, underscoring the need for a responsible reduction in foreign aid. Long-term, predictable support at reasonable levels would encourage domestic and foreign private investment, and reinforce social and economic gains.

Inconsistencies in knowledge and resources

Early in the intervention insufficient effort was made to understand Afghanistan's political economy and how its citizens viewed the role of the state. The initial 'light footprint' approach overlooked Afghan needs and was based on a misreading of the country's history, presupposing that the population would oppose foreign involvement. Paradoxically, halfway through the 2000s officials were paralysed by too much information, and the subsequent surge of resources ignored the limited absorptive capacity of the state, amplified corruption and hampered the achievement of sustainability.

Youth

With an emerging youth population, control of Afghan politics may pass from traditional power-brokers to those with a more constructive worldview. Investment in Afghanistan's younger generation will help sustain the gains made in basic rights and freedoms, especially for women and girls. To complement support for critical government institutions, international actors should continue providing support to Afghan civil society, which has a critical role in the media, advocacy and development.

Human Development

This section explores four important aspects of the vast field of human development in Afghanistan: the international approach, the role of the Afghan government, the issue of gender, and ways in which NGOs can manage increasing insecurity.

Overall conditions

Afghanistan has made significant although uneven progress in development since 2001. Economic growth has averaged over 9 per cent per year, and despite wide disparities in wealth, much of the population has benefited, at least to some degree, in terms of income generation. Macroeconomic management has been sound, inflation has been brought under control, and the Afghan currency has held its value. Access to healthcare has expanded, and school enrolment rates, particularly for girls, have improved. In some sectors, there has been progress in building or restoring critical infrastructure.⁴²

Nevertheless, Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries in the world, as evidenced by human development indicators such as life expectancy or maternal and child mortality rates.⁴³ In comparative terms, agriculture and water management have been neglected in spite of their centrality to rural livelihoods. Basic services such as healthcare are uneven in scope and quality throughout the country. The private sector has been distorted by enormous aid inflows, and is unable to compete economically with neighbouring countries. Generating jobs and incomes for the rapidly growing labour force will be an immense challenge in a country where the unemployment and underemployment rates are believed to be over 50 per cent.⁴⁴ The escalating conflict continues to stifle and deter trade and investment, contributes to capital flight and the departure of talent, and hampers access to essential services.

International approach to aid

Over the past decade, the international community has presided over severe and persistent errors in the delivery of assistance to Afghanistan: multiple, uncoordinated funding channels; short-term, supply-driven, unsuitable projects; the establishment of parallel institutions; extensive use of costly contractors who use tiers of sub-contractors; and a lack of monitoring and oversight. Most egregiously, development objectives were over-ambitious and disconnected from Afghan reality; and aid modalities and priorities were massively distorted owing to the predominance of counter-insurgency objectives.⁴⁵ Best practices in aid delivery were abandoned, and many international initiatives, as a result, were incoherent, ineffective and unsustainable.⁴⁶

⁴² World Bank, *Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014*, February 2013, pp. 61–62.

⁴³ William A. Byrd, *Afghanistan: Nurturing Political Space for Development*, Chatham House Briefing, May 2014.

⁴⁴ World Bank, *Afghanistan in Transition*, pp. 61–62.

⁴⁵ Barbara Stapleton and Michael Keating, *Military and Civilian Assistance to Afghanistan 2001–14: An Incoherent Approach*, Chatham House Briefing, July 2015.

⁴⁶ Matt Waldman, 'System Failure: The Underlying Causes of US Policy-making Errors in Afghanistan', *International Affairs* (July 2013). Vol. 89, No. 4, pp. 825–43.

Furthermore, foreign aid programmes were designed without a full understanding of the complex environment in which they were to be implemented. Too often they were executed without recognition of their political implications, especially for access to resources; at the same time, political influence was exercised without reference to its impact on development. Corrupt and predatory actors were empowered at the local level, with predictable adverse knock-on effects for development, infrastructure and services.⁴⁷

Moving forward, international donors should seek to minimize these flaws and shortcomings, and vigorously support an Afghan-owned and -directed agenda, which should set out development priorities. Realistic objectives that align with Afghan priorities over appropriate time frames should be established. A reduced international presence should enable far higher levels of coherence, including with donors from the region. Development programmes should build on a more rigorous analysis and understanding of Afghanistan's political economy, especially the relationship between politics, aid and capital flows; the role of corruption and the illicit economy, including opium production; and the role of patronage networks and political power-brokers.⁴⁸

For the foreseeable future, the delivery of development assistance will be required throughout the country in order to meet basic needs.⁴⁹ Yet the withdrawal of international troops has been accompanied by a fall in development assistance and other expenditures which helped to sustain the economy, albeit artificially. The troop withdrawal also undercuts the political case in donor countries for sustained international aid to Afghanistan.

With the diminution of foreign public and media interest in Afghanistan due to the withdrawal of foreign troops, there is a growing perception that 'nothing can be done', 'it's not worth it' or 'it doesn't matter'. Donors should develop a strategy for making a compelling case for sustained support to Afghanistan, highlighting the risks to regional stability and the continuing threat from extremist elements. Yet, ultimately, the argument must be made by Afghans. Such a case might be built on the basis of national unity, the country's fragile stability, the government's commitment to reform, and the imperative to sustain gains in development, civil liberties and human rights.⁵⁰

Box 4: An incoherent approach to military and civilian assistance

This box provides insights on the international approach to Afghanistan derived from interviews with a range of senior military and civilian figures who served in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2014.^a

Experience in Afghanistan highlights the central importance of unity of command and coherent international engagement. This is very difficult when a multitude of military and civilian actors from a host of nations is involved. It was not achieved in Afghanistan.

The strategic objectives and differing approaches of the United States and its NATO allies often entailed working at cross-purposes on counterterrorism, counter-insurgency and state-strengthening.

Bilateral engagement by states, their national priorities and weak Afghan capacity undermined efforts to forge a multilateral assistance strategy. The biggest donor, the US, *de facto* set the state-strengthening agenda but was unable to forge or implement an integrated or coherent approach.

⁴⁷ 'Summary of Discussion: Conference on State-Strengthening in Afghanistan 2001–2014', Chatham House, Stanford University and the United States Institute of Peace, March 2015.

⁴⁸ 'Afghanistan's Development Future', Chatham House Expert Consultation Summary, March 2014.

⁴⁹ Arne Strand, *Afghanistan: Innovative Risk Management Approaches for Local Aid Delivery*, Chatham House Briefing, May 2014.

⁵⁰ 'Aid and Reality: Is It Time for a New Approach?' Chatham House Expert Consultation Summary, October 2014.

International ability to contribute to a lasting stability was undermined by ignorance about the roots of the conflict and Afghanistan's political economy, whether at the national or local level, and by international collusion with predatory and corrupt actors including government officials, often to pursue counterterrorism objectives.

Militarized approaches to building stability and the short time frame for withdrawing the bulk of combat forces contributed to a tendency to mistakenly conflate strengthening Afghan security forces with strengthening the state.

Political pressure from NATO member governments to show fast, positive results affected civilian and military actors, in many cases resulting in quick fixes to complex challenges.

The Afghan government lacked the political space and the practical capacity to set and implement its own development, let alone security, agenda. The few success stories showed the value of partnering with ministries where competent Afghan officials were in place.

Going forward, efforts to achieve stability need to take greater account of national priorities, institution-building and civilian perspectives, whether regarding security and sustainability or realistic timelines and priorities for durable state-strengthening.

^a Stapleton and Keating, *Military and Civilian Assistance to Afghanistan*.

Aid and the Afghan government

The Afghan government is already facing a prolonged fiscal crisis, largely because of exceptionally high security expenditures, a weak economy and corruption in tax collection. Indeed, the government faced a budgetary shortfall of over half a billion dollars in 2014, requiring drastic cuts.⁵¹ Thus the inevitable reduction in aid – notwithstanding the shortcomings outlined above – could have deleterious impacts on the provision of basic services, poverty reduction and stability.

However, if the diminution of international aid is carefully managed, there could be an opportunity to reduce corruption, increase levels of Afghan ownership and accountability, and ensure greater focus on and prioritization of development goals. Seizing this opportunity will require both international and Afghan action. Foreign donors will need to reach a higher level of agreement on providing continued support to Afghanistan, the modalities for that assistance, and the role of multilateral bodies and international trust funds, whose relative importance will increase as bilateral engagement is reduced.⁵² The precarious economic and fiscal situation will require concerted efforts to do more with less, based on lessons learned and a far better understanding of the operating environment.⁵³ If managed wisely, the overall reduction in foreign funding could even mean that the international community has enhanced impact and leverage with the remaining funds.

The Afghan government will need to take a range of measures to enhance its credibility and effectiveness. High levels of corruption have undermined donor confidence that the Afghan government can effectively manage development aid, and have discouraged direct funding to the government.⁵⁴ Corruption also calls into question the durability of aid commitments, given the vulnerability of the aid industry to domestic politics. President Ghani, who campaigned on this agenda, is committed to reform and could make a real difference. In December 2014 his

⁵¹ William A. Byrd, 'Afghanistan's Continuing Fiscal Crisis: No End in Sight', United States Institute of Peace, May 2015.

⁵² 'Aid and Reality', Chatham House Expert Consultation Summary.

⁵³ 'Afghanistan's Development Future', Chatham House Expert Consultation Summary.

⁵⁴ Strand, *Afghanistan: Innovative Risk Management Approaches*; and 'Aid and Reality', Chatham House Expert Consultation Summary.

government made a set of commitments to reform in its policy document, 'Realizing Self Reliance'.⁵⁵ This could form the basis of an implementation plan which underpins genuine enhancements in government and partnerships with international donors to achieve results.

The Afghan government should seek to demonstrate compliance with accountability and oversight measures included in the 'New Deal for Engagement in Fragile States',⁵⁶ adopted by the OECD. It should also aim to meet the benchmarks set out in the TMAF agreed between Afghanistan and the international community in 2012. Other measures to reinforce this agenda will be substantively and symbolically important, especially taking decisive action against egregious cases of corruption; increasing transparency and public information, especially in government contracting; and making concerted efforts to increase Afghanistan's domestic revenue.⁵⁷

President Ghani also needs to take steps to preserve the 'political space' for development. As William Byrd argues in a Chatham House briefing, progress in some areas of development is attributable to effective Afghan leadership and management teams in key ministries, which have had the political scope to take forward development-related initiatives.⁵⁸ Such teams have generated results, which have in turn attracted higher-calibre personnel and more resources. However, this political space for development has been reduced by the consolidation of an entrenched political elite and worsening corruption.⁵⁹ Crucially, qualified reformers, experienced technocrats and other competent officials need to be empowered in key sectors, freed from expectations of patronage, and given the political space to prioritize and implement development-oriented policies. It is essential that an emerging political space for development include and foster those who seek to enhance the rights, freedoms and opportunities of Afghan women.

Gender and development

Over the past decade advances have been made in women's access to healthcare, education and employment, and in opportunities for them to engage politically. Yet overall progress has been mixed and fallen well below expectations. The maternal health ranking is one of the lowest in the world; school enrolment rates for girls are significantly lower than for boys, especially at secondary level; and the government has shown little political will to implement new laws and policies that seek to secure women's rights or protect women from violence. Advocates of women's rights have faced a conservative backlash. Moreover, Afghan society remains deeply unequal, with severe restrictions on women's conduct, mobility and access to property, and the frequent use of violence against those who transgress against family or societal expectations.

⁵⁵ 'Realizing Self Reliance: Commitments to Reforms and Renewed Partnership', Government of Afghanistan, December 2014, prepared in advance of the London Conference on Afghanistan.

⁵⁶ The 'New Deal', piloted in Afghanistan, 'identifies ten key areas where international engagement needs to change to focus on new and important ways of engaging and building mutual trust, including a shift to country-led fragility assessments; the re-evaluation of formal compacts; stronger support for political processes; more effective support for capacity development; greater transparency of aid; increased use of country systems and more timely and predictable aid.' Overseas Development Institute, 'A "New Deal" for Fragile States', <http://www.odi.org.uk/news/477-g7-fragile-states-new-deal-budget-strengthening-initiative> [accessed 16 December 2013].

⁵⁷ Byrd, *Afghanistan: Nurturing Political Space for Development*, p. 5.

⁵⁸ 'Political space for development' refers to the country's political configuration providing scope for the state to engage, at least to some degree, in development-oriented policies and investments supporting economic growth and improvements in social indicators; see Byrd, *Afghanistan: Nurturing Political Space for Development*, p. 3.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

In a briefing for Chatham House, Torunn Wimpelmann disentangles divergent accounts explaining the lack of progress: shortcomings in the policies of external donors and the view that change must come from within Afghan society.⁶⁰ She argues that a more balanced approach is needed, noting that donors have an important role to play and should enhance their interventions, but that this is no substitute for local political mobilization.

Gender aid has tended to focus on the symptoms of inequality, rather than tackling the underlying causes, especially attitudes, conventions and unequal power relations. Donors have promoted technical approaches and prioritized changes in the legal and policy architecture, rather than achieving societal change and genuine buy-in. Indeed, Western donors have themselves supplied consultants to 'ghost write' the policies and reports that they want to see.

A further critique points to the distortive effect of heavy external funding of women's NGOs. This has encouraged project-based activism, led by largely urbanized, Western-oriented elites, to some degree disconnected from the broader, mainly rural, population.⁶¹ Donors should not discontinue but enhance support for the women's movement and ensure that funding criteria do not adversely penalize opportunities for smaller women's organizations. Funding provided over longer time frames might reduce pressure on NGOs to produce short-term visible outputs. Gender awareness-raising might even do more harm than good if it is poorly conducted, seen as disadvantageous for men and disconnected from networks of mobilization and action. Given rapid urbanization and the scope for attitudinal change, donors should continue to support NGOs in urban areas, while also funding women's economic empowerment initiatives in rural areas.

Donors should continue to prioritize women's access to vital health and education services, especially higher education, and resist any setbacks that could emerge through negotiations with the Taliban.

Yet as Wimpelmann argues, 'in the last decade it has often been conservative social norms, rather than the lack of available opportunities, that have prevented women from fully or even partly benefiting from health, education or economic development programmes'.⁶² Crucially, donors should recognize that external aid is no substitute for local political mobilization, whether through elections or other means. Donors should not assume that gender inequality is an inherent and unchangeable part of Afghan DNA. But neither should they see NGOs, technocratic interventions and external leverage as sufficient; rather, these are tools to facilitate broader mobilization. Donors should continue to prioritize women's access to vital health and education services, especially higher education, and resist any setbacks that could emerge through negotiations with the Taliban. But in particular they should seek to preserve the political space for Afghan women. If there is genuine scope for democratic debate and organization, there will be opportunities for Afghans to develop their vision for society, formulate strategies and mobilize coalitions for change.

⁶⁰ Torunn Wimpelmann, *Leaving Them to It? Women's Rights in Transitioning Afghanistan*, Chatham House Briefing, May 2014.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Aid and insecurity

Despite their flaws, international and Afghan NGOs continue to play a crucial role in Afghanistan's human development. Whether international funding is channelled through a trust fund, such as the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, or directly through a ministry, local aid delivery is often undertaken by NGOs which are selected to facilitate or implement projects. Thus, for example, NGOs undertake projects to rehabilitate and develop villages through the National Solidarity Programme, and to provide healthcare services through the Basic Package of Health Services (BPHS), as well as other activities such as school construction, agriculture projects, and the provision of water and sanitation.

Yet Afghanistan faces the prospect of escalating armed conflict, predominantly between the ANSF and resurgent Taliban, especially for control of district centres and key highways. This will increase risks for aid workers, create access constraints and hamper project management, as well as affecting monitoring and evaluation. Indeed 2014 saw an increased targeting of NGO staff and compounds. The highest annual number of deaths of NGO workers since 2001 was recorded, up by 70 per cent on the total for 2013.⁶³ In the first half of 2015, some 26 aid workers were killed, 17 wounded and 40 abducted.⁶⁴

Knowledge and experience of how to operate and achieve results in conditions of insecurity were overlooked after 2001. Afghanistan became a victim of large-scale international involvement, militarized approaches to achieving security, conflicting international objectives and the political pressure to deliver quick results. In a briefing for Chatham House, Arne Strand argues that in seeking to manage, monitor and evaluate their projects in more difficult conditions, NGOs should look to draw on lessons from the way in which NGOs operated in the country in the 1980s and 1990s, while also making use of the new tools of mobile technology and social media. The *sine qua non* is to develop a strong relationship with beneficiary communities on the ground, and to involve them from the project's inception to its execution and oversight.

NGO monitoring and evaluation, in particular, must go beyond strict rules or control mechanisms for fund management, and extend down to the field. It can be enhanced through a range of means: ensuring a combination of international and local staff with monitoring responsibilities; consulting both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries; allowing complaints in project activities to be sent by mobile phone, including through text messages and images; assigning a monitoring role to designated community members; and using impact assessments and proxies rather than direct indicators. Joint monitoring initiatives can also be established, for instance, where multiple donors pool resources, operate in a single area or support similar projects in different areas; donors could also synchronize and calibrate their responses to evidence of fraud or mismanagement.⁶⁵

The quality and impact of projects in Afghanistan will continue to be adversely affected by local power-holders, who have long exerted pressure on NGOs in order to capture resources, expand their influence and increase powers of patronage. Nevertheless, there are ways of mitigating or offsetting such pressure, such as by establishing relationships with multiple power-holders, and indeed with communities themselves. Increasingly, development activities in rural areas require permission,

⁶³ 'Afghanistan Quarterly Data Report, 4th Quarter 2014', International NGO Security Organisation, January 2015.

⁶⁴ Mujib Mashal and Jawad Sukhanyar, 'Gunmen in Northern Afghanistan Kill 9 Local Aid Workers', *New York Times*, 2 June 2015.

⁶⁵ Strand, *Afghanistan: Innovative Risk Management Approaches*.

or at least non-objection, from the Taliban and other armed groups. While this poses immense challenges to NGOs, the experience of the 1990s shows that these are not insurmountable. Drawing on community support, local intermediaries and influential local actors, it is possible to undertake projects while still abiding by humanitarian principles.⁶⁶

Ways forward

Make the case for sustained international support to Afghanistan

Afghan and foreign decision-makers should develop strategies to ensure sustained international support to Afghanistan, highlighting the risks to the region and the threat from extremist elements while emphasizing the opportunities derived from the national unity government, reform efforts and progress made since 2001.

Provide effective support for Afghan-led development

Donors should seek to give strong, effective, long-term support for an Afghan-owned, -led and -directed agenda. Assistance should be focused on achieving development rather than counterterrorism or counter-insurgency goals, and it should support Afghan priorities rather than seeking short-term, visible outputs. Donors should avoid uncoordinated and divergent programmes and activities, and make greater use of multilateral institutions and international delivery mechanisms. They should also ensure that their efforts draw on a deep understanding of Afghanistan's past and its present-day political economy.

Build state effectiveness, tackle corruption and create political space for development

Donors should incrementally channel more aid directly to the Afghan government, which, in turn, should take steps to implement its 'Realizing Self Reliance' agenda. It should act to increase domestic revenue, tackle corruption and improve accountability in line with TMAF expectations. Given Afghanistan's new fiscal and economic environment, the TMAF itself should be revitalized as a basis for future external engagement in Afghanistan. Action should be taken by Afghan leaders to increase transparency and address cases of egregious corruption. Efforts should be made to preserve the 'political space' for development, including by assembling talented leadership teams in key ministries, with a determined focus on development goals.

Enhance efforts to strengthen women's rights, freedoms and opportunities

Donors should continue to fund but acknowledge the limits to technical approaches to challenges of gender inequality. They should continue to fund NGOs, ensuring that support is provided to large and small organizations, in both urban and rural areas, and on a long-term basis, without pressure to produce quick results. Above all, donors should recognize the power of societal norms, and seek to preserve the political space for Afghan women to mobilize politically, at all levels, to pursue their vision for society and bring about change.

⁶⁶ 'Expert Consultation on Afghanistan's Development Future', London, 13 March 2014.

Draw on lessons learned and innovative techniques for monitoring

To continue to operate in conditions of increasing insecurity, NGOs should draw on lessons learned and practices implemented by NGOs during the 1980s and 1990s, including those used to access insurgent-controlled territory. They should enhance monitoring and evaluation through strong community ownership, and draw on a range of useful and innovative techniques, including those available through the use of mobile phones, as well as synchronizing monitoring efforts.

Box 5: Interview insights

This box presents excerpts from interviews that the project team conducted including with diplomats, academics, regional experts and civil society representatives. The interviews covered a wide range of issues, from development to reconciliation.

Omar Samad – Senior Advisor to Afghan Chief Executive Officer

'Peace is actually a win-win situation for everyone. We want the region to prosper and to benefit from it. We want our people, our nation to prosper. ... We also don't think that it's going to be quick or easy, it's going to be a long road and we are ready for that long road and we hope the other side also feel the same way.'

Michael Koch – Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Germany

'Many countries in the region are concerned about the repercussions that could affect them if our efforts and the Afghan efforts for a stabilized Afghanistan were to fail.'

Niclas Trouve – Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Sweden

'Sweden has a very long-term commitment to Afghanistan. We have been present in Afghanistan long before 2001 and ... we are prepared to stay on with a limited quantity of troops even for a training mission after 2014. ... The overarching reason we are interested in Afghanistan is that we see there is strong support among the Swedish population.'

Najla Ayubi – Deputy country representative for the Asia Foundation

On the 2014 elections: 'Candidates focused on women's issues, they thought they cannot ignore the majority of the population. Even if it's symbolic, it's a positive sign for the social and political transformation of the country.'

On peace talks: 'We need more women on the actual peace talks because no one can represent women's interests apart from women. ... We have to equip them with the skills – how to negotiate and how to put their values forward and not compromise any of the constitutional or human rights.'

Orzala Ashraf Nemat – Activist and academic

'There is no doubt that the Taliban have a dominant view in subordinating women, but they are not the only ones. That needs to be tackled. The focus of international support and development should be on the structural causes of discrimination against women rather than the short term.'

'There is an expectation of the international community to continue long-term infrastructural support to Afghanistan ... It is not only beneficial to Afghanistan and the people of Afghanistan, it is part of the responsibility of the international community to fulfil the promises they have made.'

Abdullah Ahmadzai – Deputy country representative for the Asia Foundation and former chief election officer

'The Afghan people coming out on 5 April to vote for the next president proved their increased political maturity and trust for the electoral authorities and electoral process.'

Torunn Wimpelmann – Author of Chatham House briefing

'We have to recognize that nothing will change unless there is domestic political buy-in and domestic political organization ... and a strong indigenous women's movement for gains to take hold, otherwise they will be swept away by the next regime.'

Conclusion

This paper, which draws on key insights from the publications, research and expert consultations convened by the 'Opportunity in Crisis' project, is far from comprehensive or definitive. However, we hope it throws some light on the immense challenges facing Afghanistan, and some of the opportunities for moving towards a more prosperous, stable future.

How, in practical terms, these opportunities can be seized has been outlined in the relevant sections of this paper. Some key points and common themes emerge.

International assistance should be durable and long-term. The state remains heavily dependent on external funding, and requires predictable, external support in order to sustain development progress while fighting a costly insurgency. Western political disengagement and a rapid unmanaged drop in financial and technical support could be disastrous.

Both Western and regional donors to Afghanistan should work collaboratively, especially through multilateral institutions and international trust funds, which enhance coherence, accountability and national capacities. Donors should seek to promote substantive, sustainable change for Afghans, not only short-term visible results. The prevailing Western security doctrine, or immediate counterterrorism or counter-narcotics objectives, must not be allowed to compromise or undermine efforts to promote development and build the capacity of the state. Technical measures are no substitute for achieving positive changes in attitudes or practices; international political involvement should be robust, principled and respectful of Afghan sovereignty.

The Afghan government should formulate and lead the policy agenda, with international backing. Afghan political leaders should enhance the government's ability to attract, manage and account for resources. They should develop practical strategies with clear goals that are prioritized and realistic. Corruption, patronage and impunity should be rigorously targeted. The Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework should be revitalized as a vehicle for driving the agenda forward and as a basis for external engagement.

Afghan and international decision-makers should take advantage of evolving circumstances and new opportunities; they should draw on lessons learned and international expertise, while acknowledging the limits of external support. Greater efforts must be made to understand the conflict and Afghanistan's evolving political economy, which should guide and inform policy-making.

Afghanistan's neighbours and the region should be systematically engaged, given their critical role in the country's stability and prosperity. A strong partnership is required between China and the US to contain and manage long-standing regional rivalries and tensions that will otherwise, once again, see Afghanistan become the victim of proxy regional conflicts.

In sum, Afghan political leaders should lead efforts to establish a cleaner, more representative and accountable political system; and to establish an inclusive peace process, build state effectiveness and promote sustainable development. The international community must support them in these vital endeavours.

After more than a decade of international involvement in Afghanistan and well over \$100 billion spent in overseas assistance, Afghanistan's future hangs in the balance.⁶⁷ The lives of millions of Afghans depend on decisions taken by Afghan, regional and international leaders. Given the magnitude, complexity and unpredictability of the challenges facing Afghanistan, there are few easy wins or shortcuts to progress. But policy prescriptions are no substitute for political will. The indispensable condition for success is the collective determination to seize opportunities and put Afghanistan on the right track. There is too much at stake to do otherwise.

Box 6: Independent evaluation

Chatham House commissioned an independent evaluation as a contribution to assessing the project. The evaluator attended a project roundtable; reviewed publications, meeting notes and multimedia outputs; interviewed a range of individuals who were engaged with the project, including from donor governments; and undertook an online survey, including of participants at project events.

The main findings were that the length of publications was appropriate and that they were of a better quality than comparable policy research and writing about Afghanistan; the quality of meetings was good in terms of event organization and representativeness, and the range and quality of speakers. Dissemination of meeting outputs was good.

In assessing the project's success in meeting its objective of identifying pathways to stability, the evaluator noted that respondents to the survey said key objectives had been achieved, including identifying actionable options and opportunities – whether, for example, to promote inclusive politics and improve the prospects of resolving the conflict; considering the agenda of the new government; and identifying lessons learned from the intervention and whether and how these might be applied in future.

The evaluator felt that greater use could have been made of online and multimedia opportunities, including social media, particularly to communicate the most concrete policy recommendations. He made recommendations regarding project follow-up, alignment of project activities with large-scale intergovernmental meetings, partnerships to explore specific issues in greater depth, and the creation of stronger communities, notably among Afghans, around project priorities.

Regarding the use made of project outputs, the evaluator captured the following indicative comments:

- 'Used [project materials] to facilitate discussion among diplomats in Afghanistan in relation to the 2014 elections.'
- 'We used the briefings to inform the Afghanistan debate in our team, brief policy-makers, NGO partners and members of the media. We also used the videos and podcasts in our social media.'
- 'I published an article by Michael Keating on the post-Karzai transition. I noted a couple of the authors of papers as future contributors with a useful approach on e.g. gender balance or peace-building.'
- 'I write a lot on Afghanistan and the sessions I attended and the papers I read were excellent brain storming, opening new horizons. Getting to know other experts and new lines of expertise is another aspect. You have in one discussion an excellent combination of some of the top experts in a variety of fields in Afghanistan. That is quite unique.'
- 'Much better understanding of conflicting US objectives and priorities in Afghanistan which makes it much easier to understand why US actions are often contradictory. This makes it easier for other actors to decide how best and where to act.'
- 'The Afghan minister responsible for reconciliation shared some of the papers with his peers.'
- 'The Wimpelmann paper provided fresh insights on the topic which has in turn informed the work we are doing.'

⁶⁷ Congressional Research Service, 'Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy', April 2015.

Acknowledgments

Matt Waldman, an associate fellow at Chatham House, is the principal author of this paper. He worked in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2012, including as head of policy for Oxfam and as a senior political affairs officer with the United Nations. The paper intentionally draws heavily on briefings and research papers commissioned by Chatham House as part of the project, authored by William A. Byrd, Noah Coburn, Caroline A. Hartzell, Michael Keating, Felix Kuehn, Anna Larson, Alex Strick van Linschoten, Carina Perelli, Gareth Price, Scott Smith, Barbara Stapleton, Arne Strand, Torunn Wimpelmann and Matthew Wright, as well as Matt Waldman himself. The paper also draws on the summaries of 'Opportunity in Crisis' expert consultations organized and facilitated by the project team, notably Mina Bahadur and Hameed Hakimi, supported by Chatham House's Asia Programme including James Hannah, Rosheen Kabraji, Chloe Sageman and Joshua Webb.

The Chatham House 'Opportunity in Crisis' project

The 'Opportunity in Crisis' project, directed by Michael Keating and Matt Waldman and running between June 2013 and May 2015, brought experts together to develop realistic policy options for advancing political stability in Afghanistan. It was carried out by Chatham House in close collaboration with partner organizations – the United States Institute of Peace, the Chr. Michelsen Institute and the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit – and was supported by the governments of Australia, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland. The project sought to influence and inform international and Afghan decision-makers, and to ensure that the country is not overlooked as international forces withdraw. It challenged some of the dominant narratives and assumptions about Afghanistan, including the inevitability of a 'descent into chaos'. Without downplaying the immense challenges ahead, the project drew on proven experience and expertise to identify opportunities to pave the way for a more peaceful and prosperous future.

Other project publications available:

Looking Beyond 2014: Elections in Afghanistan's Evolving Political Context
Noah Coburn, February 2014 (Briefing)

Anticipating and Responding to Fraud in the 2014 Afghan Elections
Carina Perelli and Scott Smith, February 2014 (Briefing)

Why Vote in 2014? Afghan Views of the Elections
Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, April 2014 (Research Paper)

Electoral Turnout in Afghanistan: An Act of Defiance?
Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, April 2014 (Research Paper)

Not 'Legitimate' Yet: The Need for Continued Commitment after the Afghan Elections
Anna Larson and Noah Coburn, May 2014 (Research Paper)

Afghanistan: Nurturing Political Space for Development
William A. Byrd, May 2014 (Briefing)

Afghanistan: Innovative Risk Management Approaches for Local Aid Delivery
Arne Strand, May 2014 (Briefing)

Leaving Them to It? Women's Rights in Transitioning Afghanistan
Torunn Wimpelmann, May 2014 (Briefing)

Rebooting a Political Settlement: Engagement and Mediation after the Afghan Elections
Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, July 2014 (Briefing)

Who Wants What: Mapping the Parties' Interests in the Afghanistan Conflict
Matt Waldman and Matthew Wright, July 2014 (Research Paper)

A Comparative Perspective on an Afghan Peace Process: Why, When, Who and What?
Caroline A. Hartzell, December 2014 (Briefing)

Afghanistan: The 2014 Vote and the Troubled Future of Elections
Noah Coburn, March 2015 (Briefing)

Afghanistan and its Neighbours: Forging Regional Engagement
Gareth Price, May 2015 (Briefing)

Military and Civilian Assistance to Afghanistan 2001–14: An Incoherent Approach
Michael Keating and Barbara J. Stapleton, July 2015 (Briefing)

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