



Corruption Still Imperils Afghan Future— and U.S. Interests

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By [Ben W. Heineman, Jr.](#)

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In this election year, the Administration needs to blunt the Afghanistan issue by showing that the Afghan security forces and the Afghan government can survive the American troop withdrawal in 2014.

To do so, it has staged two recent events. First, on July 7, Secretary of State Clinton announced that Afghanistan would be officially designated as a “non-NATO ally of the United States” which makes it eligible for priority delivery of military hardware and for U.S. help to buy arms and equipment. But the U.S. has thus far failed to indicate what level and kind of troop support—or what type of other security capabilities—will be available for Afghanistan after the major U.S. withdrawal in 2014.

Second, on July 8, the U.S. joined in [an announcement](#) of the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework under which 70 international donors pledged \$16 billion over the next four years to strengthen the Afghan government, by making up an Afghan fiscal shortfall and helping to improve institutions and services in Afghanistan, with up to 20 percent supposedly conditioned on Afghan progress in arresting corruption and creating better governance.

But the framework document—which could be Exhibit A in any catalog of vapid bureaucratese—seems to have come off some development office word processor and bears little resemblance to a nation that is designated the third most corrupt in the world (176 out of 178) in the Transparency International corruption index, is the world’s eleventh poorest (per the World Bank) and has absorbed more than \$80 billion in non-military aid from the U.S. in the past 10 years with few concrete, let alone durable, gains. (Says [Anthony Cordesman](#) of the Center for Strategic and International Studies: “the lack of transparency and credibility has been a critical problem...particularly in the almost total lack of credibility in reporting on the impact of aid, quality and integrity of governance and presence of a functioning justice system.”)

As exercises in government puffery, neither the U.S “ally” announcement nor the donor announcement address the fundamental question with any candor: Can Afghanistan survive as a fighting force and national government after 2014? Will ethnic rivalries among the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Hazaras and other groups, renewed military pressure from the Taliban, subversion by Pakistan, and weakness and corruption of the central government, lead to a civil war, a coup or a territory run by tribal leaders and local militia not government—or renewed Taliban control over much (at least) of the Southern part of the area? Such post-2014 developments would, most importantly, make a mockery of ten years of U.S. effort by allowing a recidivist Afghanistan again to serve as a sanctuary for world terrorism –a true tragedy in light of nearly 2,000 American killed, 16,000 American wounded, 12,000 Afghan civilian deaths and U.S. expenditures of \$400 billion or more to date. (See Dexter Filkin’s recent [New Yorker article](#) for an on the ground description of different Afghan futures, and see also the [excellent analysis](#) from Center for Strategic and International Studies on total U.S. expenditures.)

The recurrent riddle of Afghanistan is that an effective Afghan Army and security effort depends on development of a legitimate Afghan state that can somehow command the allegiance of the disparate ethnic groups, develop accountable institutions and nurture an economy that does not depend on opium and can help government pay its bills without significant foreign aid. Yet that goal seems as much a chimera today as it did ten years ago when the U.S. began its Afghan misadventure. And a critical preserve and adverse factor preventing development of a legitimate Afghan state—given all the tribal and ethnic decentralizing forces—is the endemic and corrosive corruption which has

bedeviled and baffled the Americans. (See, for example, [my 2009 piece](#) “Corruption—The Afghan Wild Card,” and subsequent commentaries [here](#) and [here](#) on the subject.)



The litany of corruption issues in Afghanistan is daunting: an economy that is 30-50 percent the illicit opium trade which fuels criminal and insurgent elements; recent presidential and parliamentary elections characterized by a high incidence of electoral pay-offs and fraud; the scandal at the Bank of Kabul replete with phony loans to the Afghan elite; the U.S. being forced to withdraw criticism of President Karzai’s failure to address corruption and Karzai’s insistence that such efforts to pursue “malign networks” of Afghan elites be removed from U.S. and other investigators; the misappropriation of billions in U.S. aid funds which has led to enhanced corruption and, only belatedly, to attempts by U.S. officials to track expenditures more carefully.

The state of crisis is summarized in a [current *Foreign Affairs*](#) article by Republican Stephen Hadley and Democrat John Podesta, chairs of a bipartisan working group on the future of Afghanistan (“The Right Way Out of Afghanistan”). The Afghan government, they say, “is deeply flawed and, should the world stop compensating for its deficiencies, in danger of imploding...Officials often use formal state institutions to support patronage networks fueling high levels of corruption, cronyism and nepotism on the national and local levels...Karzai has failed...to advance a reform agenda...[instead opposing] measures that would have promoted greater accountability...The absence of transparent and effective systems of justice and law has provided Taliban insurgents with an opening to mobilize domestic opposition to the Afghan government.”

Yet, what will happen in the coming years—as America exits and the American public becomes even more alienated or indifferent—to address problems unresolved in the last ten due to intractable Afghan issues. Wise people offer happy talk. Say Hadley and Podesta: the U.S. must not just focus on a military strategy but must use “its influence to pressure the Karzai government to forge a legitimate Afghan state...and address the flaws in governance that have alienated ordinary Afghans...and fueled the insurgency.” Says Secretary Clinton: “President Karzai has made a strong public commitment to stamping out corruption, implementing key reforms and building Afghanistan’s institutions. We will support him and the government in that endeavor to enable Afghanistan to move forward toward self-reliance.” Our influence? Over Karzai (his strong commitment?) and the self-serving corruption among the Afghan elites and others? It is hard to believe such sensible people are saying such implausible things.

The most detailed exercise in wishful thinking is the international donors’ Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, which is clearly intended to mollify donor domestic audiences and which proceeds from the following dubious premise: “The Afghan government reaffirms its solemn commitment to strengthen governance, grounded in human rights, the rule of law and ... the Constitution, and holds it as integral to sustained economic growth and development.” The key concept in the document is the donors’ “monitoring of development and governance benchmarks in a transparent manner... [as a] powerful means to enable accountability to the Afghan people.” These “commitments” which will be “monitored” are in five areas: elections; governance/rule of law; integrity of public finance and banking; taxes and budgets, at both national and local level; economic growth and development. Under each area is a set of “indicators” which are goals, not the means of reaching those goals (e.g. “enact and enforce the legal framework for fighting corruption”).

What is missing, of course, is a candid explanation of the processes of social, political and economic change which will transform Afghanistan into the “model state” of the Accountability Framework and any assessment of the history, culture, conditions and political realities (Pakistan?) in Afghanistan which have made such change difficult if not impossible. As with such “summit agreements” myriad key questions are finessed. What are real timelines (Afghan government to determine later); who decides if milestones are missed; what are the consequences; will there be real “conditionality” tied to progress on anticorruption (measured how?). The sentence that wins the irony of the year award is that Afghans and donors “emphasize....that they cannot continue

'business as usual' but must move from *promise to practice*." We have been in Afghanistan for 10 years and are now in exit mode!!

So despite breezy governmental announcements on Afghanistan as a non-NATO ally and on a donor agreement, the future of the Afghan government—and its impact on the Afghan Army and on avoiding coup, civil war, tribal control, Taliban resurgence, greater Pakistan influence—is as an even more fraught issue today than it has been in the past as international withdrawal looms large. The scourge of corruption continues to imperil a weak government —and creates the risk (among other factors) that a transition from Karzai (whose term ends in 2014) will not move forward but will recede back to the conflicts and uncertainty that existed 10 years ago, raising the specter that the influence of the Taliban, Pakistan and world terrorists will wax as U.S. political interest wanes (even if its strategic interests remain the same).

Ben Heineman is a senior fellow in the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard Kennedy School and a senior fellow at Harvard Law School's Programs on Corporate Governance and the Legal Profession. He was GE's Senior Vice President for Law and Public Affairs.

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