

With the anticipated withdrawal of NATO-led ISAF forces from Afghanistan by the end of this year the country will leave behind its decade of transition (2001-2014) and enter the decade of transformation (2015-2024).

Consequently, a key question on everyone's mind is what will post-ISAF Afghanistan look like? There are two dominant views towards this question. Analysts, who take the optimistic view, contend that post-2014 Afghanistan will continue to witness economic growth through the extraction of its mineral resources which will enable it to regain its position as regional hub for trade and transit. Additionally, they also cite achievements in the security transition process pointing to the growing capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to lead security matters throughout the country. On the other hand, analysts with a less optimistic view, argue that without continued US and NATO support the conflict will protract as the ANSF lack the capabilities, professionalism and weaponry to fight a defiant insurgency. Furthermore, they argue that a reduction in aid levels will deepen the country's fiscal gap and sub national spoilers in the face of rampant lawless and poor governance will exploit its mineral industry. Consequently, this will make Afghanistan, once again, highly vulnerable to interference from its neighbors, which will only deepen regional mistrust.

Both arguments paint scenarios that are equally plausible. But in an effort to prevent Afghanistan's deterioration post-2014, the government, its international and regional partners, committed to helping guide the country through the decade of transformations stipulated in the International Conference on Afghanistan held in Bonn, the Chicago Summit on Afghanistan and the Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan. However, as it has been witnessed in the past, these commitments have not always translated into adequate actions.

Do Afghans have the capacity to assume ownership?

Speaking in the White House Rose Garden, US President Barack Obama confirmed that the US would consider leaving behind 9,800 troops after 2014, to help train the ANSF. However, he was quick to caution that "Afghanistan will not be a perfect place" and that it was not America's responsibility to make it one."¹ This is an interesting statement considering that it was the US and its NATO partners who assumed full ownership of Afghanistan's state-building process from the beginning (2001) with little space offered to Afghans to influence the process. But, now with the economic recession capturing the West, it seems the international community is ready to cut its losses in Afghanistan hence its irresponsibly rapid withdrawal deadline. Suddenly, by mid-2014, under the scheme of local ownership, Afghans found themselves being handed state-building responsibilities they were never fully prepared for by the international community.

External state-builders often intervene in conflict zones with the aim of "building functioning and self-sustaining state structures" which they can leave behind when they withdraw. However, in Afghanistan such structures have not been created. The international community's top-down and elite oriented approach at building local

ownership set in motion a centrifugal process that exacerbated internal cleaves, led to the re-emergence of old patronage networks and fragmented the UN mission in Afghanistan. This eventually stifled “the sense of ownership, the growth of local capacity and local accountability structures.”² Therefore, with no self-sustaining structures in place after the withdrawal of the international community, the country faces a real risk of exasperating its current challenges and falling back into a potential civil conflict.

Way Forward

Realizing this, the Afghan government and its international partners adopted several strategies to help foster peace and stability in post-2014 Afghanistan. The second Bonn Conference (2011), which marked the 10th anniversary of the first Bonn Agreement (2001), reaffirmed that the international community’s would not abandon Afghanistan after withdrawal. In the Chicago Summit (21 May 2012) that followed Bonn, the international community agreed to end their combat role by mid-2013 and assume an advisory and training role as Afghan forces would begin to assume the lead for security nation-wide. The Summit also highlighted the costs associated in sustaining the ANSF and thus committed to raising funds of 4.1 billion dollars to support Afghan forces till such time the Afghan government’s revenues could take over these costs. Then in the pledging conference in Tokyo (8 July 2012), the international community made their financial commitments to Afghanistan in the sum of 16 billion dollars through to 2017. This was intended to plug Afghanistan’s fiscal gaps and support Afghanistan ‘Towards Self-Reliance,’ strategy for sustainable growth and development.

Sadly these commitments and pledges are not enough to sustain Afghanistan’s economy or ensure the irreversibility of its modest security gains. In the face of scarce local capacities, insecurity, widespread corruption and rising public spending and declining government revenues these pledges will only provide short-term solutions. These pledges are unable to address the mismatch between growing Afghan expenditures and the international expectations of significant but declining donor aid. Furthermore, with the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between the U.S. and Afghanistan still pending to be signed, there is no official framework of US and NATO troops beyond 2014 despite promises made. While, Afghans may be eager to assume ownership of their future, the reality is that they are not fully equipped to assume the cornucopia of economic and security challenges that will arise when the international limelight on Afghanistan dims. Nevertheless, if Afghanistan, along with its regional neighbors and international partners take stock of these realities and evaluate economic, security and political issues in regional terms and thus create regional responses to these challenges then perhaps a more promising scenario could emerge.