

The United States and Afghanistan: A Diminishing Transactional Relationship

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The United States has a long and varied history of engagement with Afghanistan. But through all the tortuous turns and ups and downs, the relationship, from the U.S. perspective, has almost always been a transactional one. Given its “front line” status, Afghanistan has usually been a pawn in a bigger strategic game, initially between the Communist bloc and the capitalist countries in the region (including Iran under the shah, Pakistan, and India) and subsequently between the secular world and radicalized Islam. Afghanistan’s current status as a ward of the United States and international community is unusual and will not last.

This essay suggests that regardless of whether a bilateral security agreement (BSA) is signed between Afghanistan and the United States, and assuming Afghanistan does not again become a haven for terrorism targeting the United States, U.S. interest will diminish. So too will U.S. resources invested in the country—whether military, economic, developmental, or diplomatic. Neighboring powers, such as India, Iran, and Pakistan, who have an immediate stake in a secure, stable Afghanistan, will become more important players. Long memories, the need for strategic depth, and the fear that Afghan soil will once again become a battleground for proxy warfare will militate against the realization of the Afghan government’s vision of the country as the peaceful and prosperous “heart of Asia.”

The History of U.S. Engagement in Afghanistan

A brief review of the relationship between the United States and Afghanistan is instructive. Following World War II, the United States and the Soviet Union competed to maintain influence with Afghan rulers, as the British and Russian Empires had done in the previous century, using modest levels of technical, military, and development assistance—the Great Game once again played out in Afghanistan. After the invasion of

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1979, the United States sought to undermine Soviet power by supporting the *mujahideen*, using Pakistani security forces as the delivery mechanism. Once the Soviet Union left in 1989 and the Najibullah regime collapsed in 1992, Afghanistan dropped off the U.S. radar until the Taliban swept into Kabul in 1996. Then followed a period in which the United States had an ambivalent relationship with Afghanistan: not recognizing the Islamic emirate that controlled 90% of the country, but intermittently engaging with its authorities through intermediaries on specific issues; providing some humanitarian support through the United Nations and the Red Cross/Red Crescent; encouraging private-sector interest in a pipeline across the country; and expressing concern about women's rights.

All that changed with September 11. Having decisively ejected the Taliban in a lightning military campaign, the United States promoted a Western and largely multilateral agenda to stabilize and reconstruct the country and rebuild its institutions and economy. But by 2006, as the Taliban reasserted their presence and security began once again to deteriorate, the United States had moved to a counterinsurgency approach. By 2009 and the Obama administration's "surge," this had mushroomed into a full-blown military and state-building campaign with an annual price tag over \$120 billion—perhaps the most ambitious the world has seen in the last 50 years.

Next Steps in U.S.-Afghanistan Relations: The Short Term

U.S. engagement in Afghanistan will continue to evolve. In the short to medium term, much depends on whether a BSA between Afghanistan and the United States is signed. As for the longer term, predictions are unwise, but the country's strategic importance to the United States is likely to diminish unless Afghanistan once again becomes an incubator for transnational terrorism.

Afghanistan with a BSA. If a BSA is signed, there is no guarantee that Afghanistan will continue to be a recipient of exceptional levels of U.S. assistance—currently higher in per capita terms than any other country excepting Israel¹—but the prospects will be stronger that the administration will have enough political support to honor the pledges it made in Chicago and Tokyo for military and civilian support, respectively, until 2016.

With continued financial and technical support for its armed forces and levels of aid commensurate with the needs of a country of 30 million people,

¹ U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), "Foreign Assistance Fast Facts: FY2011" ~ <http://gbk.eads.usaidallnet.gov/data/fast-facts.html>.

which includes millions of refugees and displaced persons, Afghanistan has a good chance of being able to “muddle through.” Its neo-patrimonial political system, underpinned by an elite consensus that has an interest in security, law, and order, will stay in place, and the central government is likely to reach accommodations with local and provincial powerbrokers to meet basic security needs, facilitate trade and business, and deliver services to the population.

Recovery from 35 years of conflict will be slow and uneven, and the country will continue to see diverse elements of Afghan society, from reformers and technocrats to tribal and ethnic powerbrokers, vie for power and influence. The many negative media reports often obscure the transformations that have taken place, albeit at a high price, over the last 12 years, whether in terms of infrastructure; the economy; social media and freedom of speech; access to services such as health and education, including for women and girls; and above all politics. Elections, though imperfect and limited, are now embedded as a means of transferring power and authority—a far cry from the situation 10, 20, or 30 years ago and a source of optimism for the country’s future.

An uncomfortable reality for Afghans, who are fiercely proud of their independence and sovereignty, is that the state always has been, and will continue to be for a long time, dependent on foreign subsidies. Although solid progress has been made over the last few years to strengthen domestic revenue collection, 90% of the current development budget comes from Western donors.

Afghanistan without a BSA. Without a BSA, and without a status of forces agreement between NATO and the Afghan government, already dwindling political interest in Washington will likely evaporate as quickly as U.S. troops leave. If this happens, levels of financial support, whether for the country’s armed forces or its development agenda, will drop steeply. Most other Western countries will take their cue from the United States and reduce their engagement accordingly. NATO secretary general Anders Fogh Rasmussen has made clear that without a BSA, an agreement with NATO is not possible and the International Security Assistance Force will also pull out.

Experts warn that rapid international disengagement from Afghanistan—the likely result of failure to sign a BSA—might plunge the country back into chaos as unpaid security forces disintegrate; insurgents, warlords, and profiteers have freer rein; and the government soon finds itself unable to meet the most basic needs and expectations of

a rapidly growing, demographically young population. The argument that continued investment in Afghanistan is essential—not only to help secure the expensive political, social, and development gains and ensure a return from the sacrifices made over the last twelve years but also as an insurance policy against the resurgence of a lawless vacuum in Central Asia—will lose what potency it has. U.S. engagement is likely to shift its center of gravity in the region, with Pakistan as a source of concern and India as a source of opportunity.

In the long term, an unstable Pakistan is far more threatening to U.S. interests. Pakistan has a population at least five times that of Afghanistan; possesses nuclear weapons; is home to multiple insurgencies, some led by extremists with far more ambitious international objectives than the insurgents in Afghanistan; and has a much bigger diaspora, including in the United States. Pakistan's nuclear capacity, perennial tensions with India, political instability, and stark economic inequality make an ugly combination.

The United States' principal interest in Afghanistan will be preventing further attacks like those that occurred on September 11, with a secondary concern being to curtail the country's role as an exporter of other forms of insecurity, including narcotics. One issue is what the United States needs in order to protect and advance this core interest—for example, whether a physical military presence is necessary, given the long-range and remotely controlled technological capabilities of U.S. forces. Few assert that a significant civilian presence is needed, perhaps unwisely. Experience suggests that human intelligence and cultural knowledge are essential elements of successful foreign policy in Afghanistan.

There would be wider consequences of an unstable Afghanistan, not just for the Afghans themselves but for their neighbors, and in particular Pakistanis. Instability would affect economic development; services such as education, healthcare, and law; and more broadly, local, national, and regional security. These outcomes could have a very serious and negative impact on affected populations, but they are unlikely to resonate with the American public at a level that would result in a decision to risk more American lives and money.

Other interests are unlikely to outweigh this *realpolitik*. Economic considerations—for example, developing Afghanistan's much-vaunted natural and mineral wealth, including oil, gas, copper, and iron ore—do not carry much weight. The country's insecurity, rugged terrain, and landlocked location do not make it the most attractive investment destination. While the United States, particularly under another Clinton

presidency, would continue to express concerns about human rights, especially for women and girls, such rhetoric would be unlikely to result in a significant application of resources.

As the tortuous negotiations around a BSA have shown, many Afghans have an unrealistic sense of how important their country is to the United States. They cannot believe that within a few years Afghanistan could go from being considered by Washington as one of the most crucially important pieces of real estate on the planet to being of marginal relevance. Moreover, they may have an inflated, even romantic, sense of how U.S. policy is fashioned. Conspiracy theories abound, but the reality is far more mundane. A recent study whose findings were based largely on interviews with current and former senior U.S. officials and their advisers describes U.S. policymaking toward Afghanistan as “system failure,” characterized by the absence of a capacity for long-term strategic judgment.²

The Long-Term Prospects for Afghanistan and the Region

With or without a BSA, U.S. engagement with Afghanistan in the longer term will return to being largely transactional and reactive. As a nation that, like so many others, has to make significant cuts to both domestic programs and international activities—military, diplomatic, and developmental—the United States will increasingly pay less attention to Afghanistan.

This will have profound implications for the Afghans, the region, the United States, and its Western allies. On a positive note, there is a remarkable confluence of interest among the permanent five members of the UN Security Council with regard to Afghanistan—in stark contrast with other regions of the world. Russia and China have a very immediate interest, arguably even more so than the United States and the European Union, in the stability of Afghanistan and in preventing it from becoming an incubator for terrorism, drug production, and other illicit activities. Both countries are determined to contain their own militant and separatist groups, including the Uighurs and Chechens, among others. Iran and Pakistan, too, are alert to the likely consequences of having a failed state on their borders with the potential to stoke further unrest and instability within their own territories. Pakistan has already felt the consequences of the relatively free flow of armed insurgents across the Line of Control over the past decade. Moreover, India, Pakistan, and other neighboring countries

² Matt Waldman, “System Failure: The Underlying Causes of U.S. Policy-Making Errors in Afghanistan,” *International Affairs* 89, no. 4 (2013): 825–43.

would stand to benefit from Afghanistan becoming a trade and transit route for energy, food, water, and consumer goods between resource-rich and sparsely populated Central Asia and relatively resource-poor and densely populated South Asia.

Such common interests and anxieties should be the basis for collaboration to support, or at least not undermine, Afghanistan's growth and stability. The realization that neighboring countries will become more important as distant donors disengage, combined with the recognition that Afghanistan currently enjoys better relations with nearly all of its neighbors than they do with each other, helped animate the "heart of Asia" initiative. The initiative was launched by Turkey and then driven by the Afghan Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

But this shared vision to contain terrorism, improve security, and exploit opportunities for trade and economic cooperation, including through oil, gas, hydroelectric infrastructure, and transit partnerships, is compromised by a number of factors. Precedents for security cooperation in the region are weak, and there are other security dynamics in play, whether between Central Asian countries or in South Asia, that limit the priority given to Afghanistan by neighboring states. These countries are compromised, too, by raw memories of recent history and by growing anxiety at the renewed prospect of Afghanistan once again becoming a proxy theater in which other battles are fought out. An unfreezing of relations between Iran and the United States could reduce these anxieties, but the perennial stand-off between India and Pakistan still looms large. This is manifested not least by the latter's support for the Taliban, which is intended to ensure some measure of control of the territory to Pakistan's west and to prevent it from becoming beholden to India.

Rightly or wrongly, many in the region see U.S. and NATO disengagement from Afghanistan as the cue for greater instability. The current Afghan government understandably does not share this view, at least not publicly. Instead, it expresses confidence in Afghans' ability to manage their own security and future, even, if necessary, without international support, which is often seen as compromising sovereignty and independence.

As has been evident in President Hamid Karzai's negotiation tactics around the BSA, the imperative for Afghan rulers to avoid the perception that they are puppets of foreign interests and to publicly and defiantly assert their independence is easily misunderstood in Washington as ingratitude for the blood and money that the United States has invested

to date. At a time when the military intervention in Afghanistan is increasingly depicted as a failure, U.S. lawmakers and the American public view “repairing” the country as a calling too remote, expensive, and unrealistic, particularly given how unwanted by the Afghan leadership and public the United States feels.

The reputational consequences of withdrawal are high but have mostly already been paid. They are outweighed not only by other priorities in the region, notably relating to Iran, Pakistan, and India, but by priorities elsewhere in Asia and the Middle East, including relationships with China, Japan, South Korea, and the Southeast Asian nations. From the perspective of many U.S. policymakers on both sides of the aisle, the Asia-Pacific region is where the greatest number of opportunities (and potential threats) lie for the coming decades.

Afghanistan and the region will continue to demand U.S. attention, not least as a potential exporter of terrorism. The United States will still want to maintain a base to stage drone or other operational strikes against those who would do it harm, whether in Pakistan, Afghanistan, or elsewhere. The United States thus will not withdraw completely from the region. But attention and resources are finite, and in the minds of many in Washington, other regions demand and deserve more. Expect, then, that in the coming years Afghanistan will receive less attention and U.S. support, with or without a BSA. ◆