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TOWARDS A SOVEREIGN AFGHANISTAN

*Summary*

*Vers. 11/30*

The Liechtenstein Institute on Self-Determination at Princeton University convened the conference, “Towards a Sovereign Afghanistan,” October 20-22, 2011, in the Cecilienhof Castle of Potsdam near Berlin, Germany. More than 40 leading experts from Afghanistan and 14 other states participated in the private, off-the-record conference. The colloquium addressed four key issues relevant to the immediate and near future of Afghanistan: governance and economy, identity, reconciliation and reintegration, and the region and macro region. Each issue area was considered along the lines of new approaches to be taken to address outstanding problems, different perspectives than those traditionally taken to find solutions, and the ways these issues should be tackled with Afghan experts in the lead.

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OPENING

Over the past ten years, mistakes have been made by the international community in its involvement in Afghanistan, priorities were often wrong, and promises too ambitious. The goal set in 2005 with the NATO-led expansion of ISAF and the launch of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy was strongly tested and in some cases went beyond the capabilities of Afghans and their international partners in the face of a resurgent Taliban movement, deeply entrenched structural challenges in Afghan governance and economy, and lack of donor accountability. But today, a degree of consensus has emerged around the key strategic goal and around a timeline to pursue it. The goal of international military, political, and economic involvement in Afghanistan is to achieve a “sufficient” degree of stability as well as to maintain respect for fundamental human rights, including those of minorities and women. While the international community has reaffirmed its continued commitment, future engagement should be “by, for, and with the Afghans and Afghanistan” on their way to obtain full sovereignty. No strictly military solution exists but a political solution must be found that

is owned by the Afghan people. The more realistic the political process becomes, the more realistic the prospect of an end to major hostilities.

There is concern among Afghans about the weakness of the government in the areas of security, governance and development. As a result, the foremost challenge for the international community is to provide credible reassurance to the Afghan people, government, and countries in the region that the drawdown in 2014 will not be a replay of history – that the international community is not going to abandon the Afghans once again. Psychology and perception are key. Reassuring Afghans will require a strong and clear international commitment. However, obtaining that continuous commitment from international actors requires not just a reiteration of the strategic rationale behind this commitment but also a routine effort to underscore positive results in Afghanistan, from education and the provision of health services to economic development.

With respect to the upcoming International Bonn Conference, which will be chaired by Afghanistan, it was deemed critical that the Afghans have the lead voice through hosting a large and inclusive state delegation. The key aspects of civilian transition will be discussed at Bonn as will be the reaffirmation of the international commitment. The notion of a political dialogue will also be on the agenda; this dialogue, and the discussion about its structure, content, and feasibility, both in Afghanistan and on the international stage, must be inclusive. The notion of inclusivity was explored – even the steps towards dialogue, or the consideration of dialogue, ought to be inclusive. In addition to the importance of inclusive dialogue, the international community and regional states must emphasize the notion of non-interference. In order for Afghanistan to exercise its sovereign right to govern its internal affairs without interference, a UN Security Council resolution might help underscore the principle of non-interference and provide a mechanism for recourse on the part of the Afghan state.

Despite the positive transformations that have occurred, the international community cannot yet entirely exclude the possibility that its efforts may fail in Afghanistan. It cannot be expected that imported models based on foreign experiences will have immediate results. Afghanistan resides in a challenging neighborhood and one must be realistic about current political outcomes under the very trying circumstances the country has experienced over the last three decades.

## GOVERNANCE AND ECONOMY

There is an absence of a clear political strategy in the international community and on the part of the Karzai government – in particular, the focus has been largely on the military hand-over rather than a comprehensive articulation of the political (and economic) way forward. Pressing issues exist regarding the dangers of an ethnic divide seen by many to be growing, the future of women's rights minority rights, unemployment, warlordism, and the current viability of the constitution itself. All of these issues have received significant expert analysis but little political attention. The possibility of "reopening" the constitution may be one way to address questions or calls for political reform, and even a path toward reconciliation with the Taliban. At the same time, even a well-intentioned attempt at "fixing" the constitution could amount to reopening a "Pandora's box," with dangerous and unforeseeable consequences that could outweigh any potential good. For example, in the absence of a clear definition of what is "Islamic" and "un-Islamic" according to the constitution such an attempt could open the way for future regulatory authorities to exercise arbitrary power. On the other hand, deconcentration and delegation (electoral, political, budgetary) may represent a means of strengthening the capacity and representativeness of provincial government without necessarily "reopening" the constitution. However, this still leaves open the question of who will govern – i.e., where are the

trained bureaucrats to run the government? Despite significant rhetoric, both foreign and Afghan, with respect to the cultivation of “good governance,” ordinary Afghans continue to experience inefficiency, graft, and predation in their encounters with government at all levels.

In addition to potential reforms, it is important to understand provincial-level politics as they actually are rather than as they might be, especially relating to the role of local elites in creating and utilizing political and economic outcomes. What should we make of localized pockets of stability and development that have arisen in the absence of “good” government? The international community cannot necessarily control or direct provincial political economies as a function of a defined political strategy. Whether there is an indigenous attempt at political-constitutional renegotiation or whether sufficient change can be achieved within the existing framework, it is clear that Afghans and internationals alike must work together to recognize and consolidate local “successes,” building from the ground up and “going with the grain” of Afghan politics and society.

Afghanistan’s civil society, while vibrant in many ways, is very fragmented – those who interact with international actors often do not reflect the characteristics of the entire segment of society they ostensibly represent. Obviously, the civil society will continue to need international protection and support. Afghan members of civil society ought to focus inward and build unity and representativeness rather than cater to foreign agendas and concerns.

Corruption in Afghanistan remains an important issue to be addressed, though it must be understood as a symptom more than a disease. Moreover, corruption is not a singular concept but something that takes many forms. Petty corruption exists as does grand corruption, and it is important also to consider the possibility that some forms of patronage, which members of the international community often see as evidence of corruption, can actually have a stabilizing effect. From this point of view, anti-corruption efforts ought to target the phenomenon in its worst forms – those that are most divisive and delegitimizing. Moreover, the international community ought to set a positive example by adhering to the highest legal standards with respect to its own activities. The tremendous influx of aid money has contributed to high rates and new forms of corruption that may become less prevalent with a decline in foreign funds. One must only remember that some American foreign and military aid found its way into the hands of the very insurgents American soldiers were fighting on the ground.

Strategies for diminishing corruption may involve top-down as well as bottom-up approaches. Credible vetting of political appointments is one possible top-down strategy, as is the elimination of the Single Non-Transferrable Vote electoral system in order to open the way for the emergence of a viable political party system. Ultimately, a great many members of the top political leadership are involved in corrupt practices, making real change difficult at this time. Until real political change takes place, one ought to keep expectations limited with respect to anti-corruption initiatives. Effective bottom-up initiatives, on the other hand, have included the election of local community monitors at the village-level. This particular mechanism has enabled the collection of previously unattainable data on local perceptions with regard to development aid projects and has introduced mechanisms for achieving new-found accountability with respect to the expenditure of aid dollars.

Security considerations are also key to any discussion about governance and the economy. It has been suggested that security incidents involving NATO/ISAF forces in the South this year are fewer than in previous year. This development, while positive for ISAF and the Afghan National Army, must be caveated. Some argue that the insurgency seems to have lost its momentum in certain parts

of the country, but the question remains as to how sustainable these improvements will be. Moreover, a shift in national security as defined in these terms does not necessarily translate into improvements in human security as perceived by ordinary Afghans. Personal security has actually decreased for many. Concerns also remain in relation to the long-term sustainability of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). In particular, it remains unclear how the approximately \$2,000 per capita cost of maintaining the Afghan security forces in addition to “framework” assistance (e.g. helicopters) will be covered. Second, and perhaps more critically, questions exist as to the capacity for consolidation on the part of the army as well as the police, which, despite serious fortification over the past 18 months, still have some significant weaknesses. Central to the sustainability of ANSF is an intensified focus on education. Presently, 80 per cent of those seeking to qualify for service are failing because they do not have the appropriate educational training.

Ultimately, the economy is a central factor in Afghanistan’s governance, stability, and political well-being. In particular, the challenges of high unemployment rates, capital flight, (political) brain drain, untapped agricultural potential (often as a result of water and electricity shortages), and the opportunities and dangers presented by the burgeoning mining industry must be addressed. As long as the Afghan economy cannot support its population, the country will look to outside sources of support and risk collapse into civil war over the limited resources that exist. The political economy of international withdrawal is hence a key issue. How will the diminished presence of international militaries, diplomats, organizations, and aid agencies affect those who have been employed or enriched by their presence – from private security firms and warlords to young Afghans in Kabul and the provinces? How will those who lost jobs find new employment? A number of Provincial Reconstruction Teams, PRTs, for example, have influenced provincial political economies in powerful ways. It is critical for donor countries to anticipate the potential impact of their withdrawal from the provinces. Poppy cultivation will also remain an important source of economic livelihood and security in the absence of credible alternatives; in fact, even in provinces in which cultivation had dropped dramatically in the last several years, signs of a return to the crop are evident. Despite long-time donor attention to this problem, few sustainable solutions have emerged; needless to say, the implications of widespread cultivation and trafficking for Afghanistan and the region are significant.

## CULTURE AND IDENTITY

Issues of identity and national unity loom large in any discussions about the future of Afghanistan, and both historical precedent and current events must be considered.

In 1919, King Amanullah secured recognition of full independence from Britain and in 1923 drafted the country’s first constitution, which became an example for other countries in the Muslim world with respect to political design, women’s rights, and modernization. In essence, Amanullah introduced a notion of being “Afghan” that transcended ethnic boundaries. Much of the groundwork in shaping Afghan nationalism was undertaken through an independent newspaper before King Amanullah’s reign. This newspaper defined and articulated a new vision for what it means to be an Afghan. This had a deep impact on the influential group of ‘Young Afghans’ of which Amanullah was a key member. Participants felt that today’s media in Afghanistan did not play a similar role in relation to Afghan identity and national unity. Indeed, many outlets are divisive. Therefore, it was felt that the articulation of norms of quality journalism to improve the performance of media organizations operating on Afghan soil would be useful.

Despite decades of civil war, after 2001, the Afghan people emerged resilient and capable of reconnecting with the nationalist or pan-ethnic ideological legacy of their forefathers. Nonetheless, fears were expressed that the danger of ethnic fractionalization still looms large today. During the colloquium, some called into question the “ethnic” dimension of the Taliban agenda, arguing instead that the Taliban sought to spread their particular brand of Islamic ideology in Afghanistan, irrespective of ethnic background. Many participants, however, recognized that the Taliban have in actual fact represented an essentially Pashtun group, perceived as threatening by other ethnic groups.

From another perspective, the social processes of transformation with respect to contemporary Afghan cultural and political identity might be attributed to four major factors: the urbanization of Afghanistan in the last decade; the return of more than six million refugees who arrived back home with a new sense of “Afghan-ness;” unprecedented connectivity among Afghans; and an enormous level of social mobilization and the development of civil society organizations. This is a very different picture of Afghanistan than the caricature many present of a tribal, segmented, and traditional society. One might consider it a model that reflects the transnational experience of Afghans, who have crossed borders and returned to pursue economic interactions for a long time; this stands in some contrast with the notion of a more clearly delimited “nation-state” of the kind envisioned and articulated by the Afghan king Amanullah. But perhaps what most binds together young Afghans today, rather than ideology or ethnic identity, is a desire simply to survive as a function of living through decades of war.

## NEGOTIATIONS AND REINTEGRATION

Those who consider negotiations a key part of the political way ahead are concerned that the architecture of dialogue at present is fractured, disorganized, and to date has been unproductive. Current reintegration efforts, absent a larger political framework, are often contributing to predation and insecurity. Moving forward, an improved structure might include a third party mediator; a location for negotiations outside of Afghanistan; an office for Taliban representatives outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan; the creation of lobby groups to advocate on behalf of human-, minority, and women’s rights; and the commencement of a credible national conversation about the terms of a desired outcome.

Arguments made on behalf of negotiations rest on the notion that the great majority of Afghans want peace and recognize the absence of a military solution to this conflict, an attitude that is allegedly also held by many within the Taliban movement. Any hope for advancing the processes of sociopolitical and economic transformation underway in Afghanistan, according to this strain of thought, requires an end to insurgency. But to be effective, any attempt at “reconciliation” would need to be broad based and inclusive to achieve that result. It is likely that the outcome of negotiations will not involve true reconciliation but rather a decision to coexist uncomfortably and to share power in one of a number of possible configurations. Of course, negotiated political solutions have been achieved around the world on the part of very ideologically divergent groups. Whether this will work in Afghanistan remains to be seen.

While many describe the Taliban as an indecipherable organization, some argue that the international community does actually have information about the movement and its different strands. Some even maintain that key elements within the Taliban are open to conversation. In this context, time may be of the essence, as whatever cohesion exists within the movement may be lost and a more

splintered Taliban may make for a worse negotiating partner as a result. In any case it can be expected that there will be small residual hard-line groups which will continue to carry out acts of violence (as has been true almost invariably in other cases around the world where political violence has given way to forms of “reconciliation”). It is important, moving forward, to base our collective analysis of the “pros and cons” of dialogue on what we continue to learn about the organization and its constituent elements.

Others, however, do not accept the premise that talks make sense at this time as evidenced by the fact that, despite numerous overtures from the Karzai regime, the Taliban has not signaled a real desire to negotiate and, on the contrary, has continued to engage in violent acts that reflect a commitment to war. Indeed one may ask why the Taliban should negotiate now, if they assume the international community will soon depart. However, it would be premature to view the Taliban as capable of assuming power once again. Some describe “reconciliation” as a cover for international requirements to exit Afghanistan and express concern that whatever gains have been made in the last decade may be at risk if compromised away through talks or a power-sharing agreement. From this perspective, depictions of willingness on the part of the Taliban movement to accept the key tenets of Afghanistan’s current political system – including but not limited to the constitution – may be unrealistic. Even if a negotiated agreement could be secured, is there any guarantee that civil war would not still break out if those who signed the agreement went back on their word? Skepticism remains as to whether or not we really do know who the Taliban are, what they stand for, and who has the authority to speak and make concessions on their behalf. Evidence exists to suggest that the Taliban involves both fighters and funders, so while the agenda of some financiers might be influenced by different forms of international pressure, those who are fighters may very well remain determined to continue warring in order to maintain their own relevance within the movement. Some called this a “fight and talk” strategy, which seems to be pursued by elements in the Taliban.

In any case, the process of negotiations in this kind of environment would be one of years and ought not to be seen as a shortcut. Moreover, the strength of the Taliban insurgency can be attributed, at least in part, to corruption and predation associated with the government. Negotiations with the Taliban would not address these grievances, which will only be alleviated if and when civilian institutions are strengthened and legitimized. In this context, even within a given village, one can find different kinds of Taliban that must be differentiated from one another: local thieves and bandits, unemployed youth who have been trained across the border, and foreign fighters. While the first two groups may be reconcilable, what about the third? This description of the Taliban links to the broader argument that one cannot separate indigenous negotiations with the Taliban from the interests and behavior of Pakistan.

## AFGHANISTAN AND THE REGION

One of the key demands by the international community is for a “crystal clear” guarantee of non-interference in Afghanistan and respect of its sovereignty. The conversation about reconciliation and reintegration is intimately tied to a discussion about the geopolitics of the region, in particular Pakistan’s agenda with respect to Afghanistan and Kabul’s possible need for balance with Tehran and Delhi against Islamabad’s influence. One of the central questions is the degree to which Pakistan’s interests in Afghanistan can be understood and effectively influenced in order to allow for an end to the insurgency and a peaceful way forward as foreign troops begin to draw down. In this regard, one school of thought suggests that the United States, in particular, has a great deal more influence with Pakistan than has been leveraged. Another suggests that the United States is constrained and must

work to contain Pakistan as best as it can. In either case, the argument can be made that the final outcome inside Afghanistan ought to address Pakistan's minimal security concerns in order to prevent it from spoiling that outcome altogether. These security concerns include India's soft power influence in Afghanistan, its perceived "presence" inside Afghanistan, its alleged support for the Baluch insurgency in Pakistan, and the existence of a highly centralized, unfriendly Afghan government whose security forces are trained and equipped by the West. It must also be noted that the Pakistani security establishment may be invested less in a stable Afghanistan than in an Afghanistan led by a friendly regime. This possibility raises questions about the degree to which the Afghan state can assert its own sovereignty in the face of persistent interference from across the border.

India's interests in Afghanistan are also important to any regional discussion as India will likely remain very engaged with Afghanistan bilaterally, a relationship that Afghanistan will, for its part, likely leverage vis-a-vis Pakistan. India desires access to resources in Central Asia and Afghanistan; seeks to prevent the rise of another radical Islamist regime; and aims to limit Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan as well. India's footprint in Afghanistan is significant, in terms of its financial, diplomatic, and training support, and ties between the two countries are strong in historical, cultural and social terms. The recent strategic agreement forged between the two countries reflects a commitment on both of their parts to maintain a strong and mutually beneficial relationship. But some wonder whether peace in Afghanistan might come only through a resolution of the Kashmir question between India and Pakistan.

For the transition process the role of the neighboring countries and the wider region is critical to the realization of Afghan stability and prosperity. Diplomatic attempts should be made to foster a collective consensus that a stable, peaceful, and economically improving Afghanistan serves the interests of all. In this regard, some favor the new Afghanistan to practice a kind of neutrality with regard to its affairs within the region. While the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan and the inking of strategic partnerships preclude strict neutrality, Afghanistan might eventually be able to assert a kind of "constructive" neutrality vis-à-vis its neighbors. While, constructive engagement between Iran and the United States seems unlikely in the near future, the governments of India and Pakistan have been reengaging with each other and have recently made small steps improving their bilateral relationship through steps such as the conferring of the Most Favorite Nation Status for trade with each other. International support for such small steps towards improving regional bilateral relationships will be key to securing regional stability and peace in Afghanistan. In addition, a diplomatic push to convince each country in the region to commit to Afghanistan's peace, stability, and sovereignty as part of a functioning macro-regional compact might convince potential spoilers to commit as well. A guaranteeing (rather than enforcing) mechanism, could emerge in the form of an organization that consults regularly and that can offer to monitor adherence to the agreed regional framework – as suggested by the Istanbul Process on Regional Security and Cooperation for a Secure and Stable Afghanistan.