

# Afghanistan

## Opportunities and Risks

BY ASHRAF GHANI

The conflict in and around Afghanistan is entering a decisive phase. The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), armed with a new counterinsurgency (COIN) doctrine and resources to conduct a forceful campaign, is engaging in a counteroffensive against the insurgency. Drawing on lessons learned from their own past insurgencies both regionally and globally, the insurgents are also constantly changing tactics. The inevitable clashes between the use of force and use of violence will exact a heavy cost in human lives this year.

Reduction of violence cannot be the measure of progress, as all counteroffensives historically have initially increased both the level of violence and number of casualties. The success of the counteroffensive will be judged by its role in the larger project of counterinsurgency—creating the enabling environment for a stable political and economic system that can turn both Afghan citizens and regional players into stakeholders in its success.

Catalyzing the emergence of such a system requires an appreciation of present opportunities and risks. Conceptually, the challenge lies in institutional design rather than planning. The distinction is important: while planning applies established procedures to solve a problem (presumed to be largely understood) within an accepted framework, design inquires into the nature of a problem (presumed to be largely outside of preexisting understanding) in order to conceive a framework for solving that problem. Planning is problemsolving; design is problem setting.<sup>1</sup> ISAF, as General Stanley McChrystal's report of last year shows, has been functioning as a learning organization. It has been setting the problem in terms of reframing the threats to Afghanistan, saying they arise from bad governance and a predatory political elite as well as the insurgency.<sup>2</sup> International civilian actors, by contrast, are still engaged in a planning mode of operation, bringing tried but not tested solutions to problems they have neither analyzed nor prioritized. Too often, established bureaucratic procedures combined with improvisation by officials lacking

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shared vision, common frameworks, and continuity create misalignments between civilian and military goals, strategies, and tactics.

The greatest opportunity and risk, therefore, lies in *framing* the issues. Whether Afghan, international, and particularly U.S. leadership can produce a new narrative that secures the buy-in of their publics will make the difference between creating a stable order and condemning the country to years of continuing conflict.

### Scenario 1: Capitalizing on Opportunities

Four major opportunities to create positive momentum toward a stable economic and political order in Afghanistan present themselves at this juncture. Each opportunity, if capitalized on, could create a virtuous chain of consequences, outlined below.

Afghanistan has the potential to be not only the world's largest producer of copper and iron, but also a major player in rare earths

**I. Natural Resources.** Geology has emerged as the ultimate game-changer for Afghanistan. Aerial and seismic surveys undertaken by the U.S. Geological Survey reveal that the mineral resources of Afghanistan are worth at least \$1 trillion. The country has the potential to be not only the world's largest producer of copper and iron, but also a major player in the production and processing of rare earths, which are used in products ranging from batteries to electrical cars and weapons systems. Moreover, these mineral resources are distributed equally between the northern third and

southern two-thirds of the country, with significant deposits in the valleys of the mountain chains that divide north from south and whose populations currently suffer from extreme poverty. As the headwaters for a number of rivers flowing to neighboring countries, Afghanistan also generates 65 to 85 billion cubic meters of water per year but uses only 10 percent of it. The potential for hydropower, not only for use in Afghanistan but also for sale to power-starved India and Pakistan, is immense.

If Afghanistan can get natural resource governance right, these consequences would follow for the economic and political system:

- ❖ The country would have a domestic base of revenue generation, which would provide the fiscal basis for a modern state that can perform core functions for its citizens. This revenue base would ensure Afghanistan's gradual transformation from a ward of the international community to a partner, able to pay for its own security and development.
- ❖ The mineral and water resources of the country would justify investment in public infrastructure, such as railways, roads, dams, and power lines, which would knit the country into a cohesive economic space and integrate it with the regional and global economy. Afghanistan is located in the heart of Asia, within easy distance of 3 billion people and potentially easy reach of China, India, and Russia—the three most important emerging economies in the world. Economic incentives could therefore be more effective than political means in leveraging buy-in to a stable and peaceful Afghanistan from neighbors near and far.



Mineral resources throughout Afghanistan are estimated at \$1 trillion and within easy trading distance of China, India, and Russia

**II. U.S.-Afghan Strategic Partnership.** President Barack Obama's engagement with Afghanistan has made it a global foreign policy issue. The resulting commitment of forces and resources has given ISAF the means to launch its counteroffensive. President Obama is also ready to enter into a strategic framework agreement between Afghanistan and the United States that would result in the medium- to long-term provision of security and development assistance by Washington to Kabul. The potential consequences of establishing this state-to-state and people-to-people relationship are as follows:

- ❖ The United States would emerge as the guarantor of Afghan territorial integrity and sovereignty.
- ❖ U.S. long-term commitment to security and development assistance would provide the resources and time horizon necessary for meaningful transformation of Afghan institutions.
- ❖ Afghanistan's partnerships with Europe and Japan would be strengthened.
- ❖ The diplomatic power of these partners could be used to persuade Afghanistan's neighbors to become stakeholders in its stability, peace, and prosperity.

**III. Good Governance.** Afghanistan is full of stories of successful institutional change: in sports, the Afghan cricket team emerged from nowhere to global prominence; in communications, which went from 100 mobile phone subscriptions in 2002 to over 12 million in 2010; in the media, where Afghan entrepreneurs have launched multiple successful satellite television stations and created new opportunities for public debate; in public finance, where expenditure

systems have been declared among the most robust in the developing world by the World Bank; in health care, where the child mortality rate has been significantly reduced; and in rural development, where 23,000 villages have been reached by the National Solidarity Program, named one of the most innovative rural development programs by World Bank president Robert Zoellick. These successes accentuate the sharp contrast between Afghanistan's current status as the second most corrupt country on Transparency International's index and its underlying potential for good governance.

Most of the examples of successful institutional transformation described above are the products of a design approach called national programs. A national program is an instrument that enables a state to perform one of its core functions by mobilizing existing capabilities, building additional capabilities, marshaling partnerships, promulgating rules and procedures, and engaging stakeholders. When citizens are served by and invest in the continuity of national programs, they also become invested in the stability of the state. The national program approach, its proven successes, and their continuing benefits, indicate several potential consequences for the promotion of this approach to good governance:

- ❖ Programs could be designed to improve the delivery of services to citizens and generation of revenue, extending trust in the system.
- ❖ Cross-cutting themes of governance, such as civil service and legislative reform, financial accountability, and human capital development, could be addressed systematically.
- ❖ The issue of delegations, alignments, and accountabilities among province, district, village, municipality, and central governments could be addressed.
- ❖ The market, as recent global experience has shown, requires state regulation. Bad governance of the relations between the state and private sector, however, drives the economy into informality, illegality, and ultimately criminality. Good governance of these relations therefore has not only economic but also developmental, social, and political consequences.

Bad governance, as pointed out by ISAF and acknowledged by President Hamid Karzai in his speeches to the Peace Jirga, has been a driver of insurgency and conflict. These areas of governance reform would have a significant impact on the perception of the population, helping to convince the Afghan people that their government is worth siding with.

**IV. A Law and Order Approach to Security.** Commitment to good governance will create the impetus for a law and order approach to security. The key equation describing the outcome of a struggle between an insurgency and a counterinsurgency was framed by Robert Thompson long ago:

**Legality + Construction + Results = Government**

**Illegality + Destruction + Promises = Insurgency**

Even though the Afghan National Army has made substantial progress, the army, police, and intelligence services have a long way to go before they embody the instruments of legitimate

force, upholding an order bound by rule of law. The judicial system, which should uphold the law that legitimates the use of force, is even less capable of fulfilling its role. If Afghanistan is to take over responsibility for ensuring law and order within its borders, its judicial system must be able to meet the provisions laid out by the constitution, laws, and covenants, which include obligations to provide due process to its citizens and protect them from treatment that violates international conventions ratified by the Afghan state. The adoption of COIN presents the United States with an opportunity to extend its engagement by training Afghan forces to a deeper examination, strengthening, and reconciliation of the fundamental institutions of Afghan law and order. Commitment to such an approach by the Afghan government and ISAF would have the following consequences:

- ❖ A transparent and accountable judicial system would allow for the transition to the Afghan government of detention facilities, searches and seizures, and trials of suspected insurgents and terrorists, resolving issues of authority over and accountability for Afghan citizens in U.S. detention.
- ❖ The provision of expedient, fair, and credible justice at the subnational level would overcome a comparative advantage of the insurgency, as swift justice addresses a real need of the population.
- ❖ The creating of a credible framework for property rights, enforcement of contracts, and fair resolution of disputes would clear the way for billions in Afghan-held funds to be invested in-country, thereby creating jobs, in particular for the poor, women, and

youth, who make up the three numerical majorities of the population.

- ❖ The subordination of the use of force to the rule of law would be the key to transforming national security institutions into trustworthy upholders of a legitimate, democratic political order.

## Scenario 2: Succumbing to Constraints

The opportunities outlined above exist in precarious balance with a series of risks or constraints. If we fail to understand the constraints or to contain the risks, any one of the

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following factors could easily derail the opportunities, while their combined impact would be devastating.

**I. ISAF Loses Its Status as Protector of the Population.** Protection of the population, the core idea of the counterinsurgency doctrine, has either been abandoned or has failed to be translated from theory into practice. COIN has only been pursued in earnest in Afghanistan for 1 year. While General Petraeus and his key officers among U.S. forces are committed to this doctrine, COIN has yet to become North Atlantic Treaty Organization doctrine or be translated into a set of operational procedures that can provide sergeants and officers in the field with guidelines adapted to the context of Afghanistan. Engineering a paradigm shift is hard enough in the natural sciences; cultural change in hierarchical



organizations is even more difficult and requires time to propagate through the ranks. Whether the U.S. political calendar can allow the time necessary to transform COIN into organizational culture in ISAF remains to be seen. Additionally, the tactics of the insurgency, which can use any and all forms of violence, could drive ISAF into uses of force that undermine its core principles. Reversion from a counterinsurgency to a counterterror approach would fundamentally change the relationship between the Afghan population and international forces, and could allow the insurgency to cast ISAF as oppressors rather than protectors of the population.

**II. Neighboring Countries Choose to Support Destabilizing Afghanistan.** Afghanistan's neighbors have provided sanctuary, arms, and resources to the insurgents, while various governments have long used Afghanistan as a site of proxy warfare among their secret services. These actors may judge that the United States and its partners, who have been deployed to Afghanistan according to United Nations Security Council resolutions, lack the staying power of regional players and will therefore adopt state policies that provide support to groups dedicated to the use of terror and violence. The decisions made by Pakistan, a country whose stability simultaneously depends on and bolsters Afghanistan's stability, will be particularly important. Pakistan can neither impose a unilateral settlement in Afghanistan nor deliver the insurgents to a negotiating table. Islamabad has a consistent history of misreading Kabul and has yet to define its national interests in a manner compatible with the interests of a sovereign and peaceful Afghanistan, from whose territory no hostile actions would be launched against the interests of a sovereign and peaceful Pakistan. If Pakistan chooses to pursue short-term interests, narrowly conceived and

backed by the use of violence, those interests could pose significant risks to Afghanistan, ISAF, the region, and Pakistan itself.

### ***III. Natural Resources Become a Source of Further Conflict and Criminalization.***

Afghanistan's newly discovered natural wealth, if not governed properly, could exacerbate conflict, corruption, and agitation for proxy powers by neighbors near and far. Congo and other natural resource-rich African countries provide vivid reminders that endowment of natural capital, in the absence of human capital and institutions of governance, can prove a curse rather than a blessing. This pattern is already in evidence in some parts of the country, where struggles for dominance over precious stones, coal mines, timber, and other natural resources are driving instability, consolidating the power of strongmen, and contributing to bad governance.

The narcotics trade makes up the major part of Afghanistan's criminal economy and is fully integrated into the networks that are the dark shadow of globalization. The narcotics traffickers already entrenched in Afghanistan have the money, muscle, and other means to criminalize the governance of these natural resources. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that international traffickers have reaped \$460 to \$600 billion from the cultivation, processing, and trafficking of drugs in Afghanistan, in contrast to \$18 billion going to Afghan traffickers and \$6.3 billion to the 1.67 million Afghan farmers engaged in cultivation. Ensuring that this scenario is not repeated in the capture of our natural wealth should be a major priority.

***IV. The Afghan Government Is Unable to Meet the Tests of 2010–2011.*** President Karzai has emerged as a decisionmaker without significant policy debate or checks and

balances. The president in particular and the Afghan government in general must understand the risks and opportunities of the present moment if they are to avoid these risks. Several tests must be met by the government within the next 2 years. If the September parliamentary elections are marred by corruption and intimidation, it will erode tenuous public support in Europe and weaken public support in the United States during the election year. Once past that test, the government must then prepare in earnest for both the December 2010 assessment of ISAF strategy and the July 2011 transition. Failure to establish an environment of trust with ISAF and

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the international community, or perception of lack of serious effort to solve the governance problems, could create a negative climate in December and lead to a major reassessment of COIN. President Karzai must be prepared to take ownership of the agenda of government reform, lead anticorruption efforts, and assume the duties of commander in chief. The final test will be whether the government can build a national consensus on peace and reconciliation. This consensus will be not only a test of statecraft in itself, but also a critical step in constructing a wider and deeper agenda of state-building. Measures that divide the nation, or lead important constituents to believe that the neighbors are contravening Afghan national interests, will have major adverse consequences.

**V. Governance Reform Does Not Reach Southern Afghanistan.** The true test of COIN doctrine is in southern Afghanistan in general and in Kandahar in particular. Despite some progress in Helmand Province, bad governance has become the norm rather than the exception in the southern provinces. Their political and economic elites are either deeply divided or perceived as focused on short-term gains at the expense of medium- to long-term stability and prosperity. The bureaucracy in Kabul has been either

Afghan people for a democratic order embodied in rule of law was undermined by seemingly arbitrary conduct and lack of commitment to the use of force within a rule of law framework.

The adoption of COIN marks a welcome departure from the old framework. The fundamental insight of COIN doctrine is that insurgency and counterinsurgency are engaged in a political contest for the will of the people, and therefore the use of force is only part of a process toward clear political objectives in the medium term.<sup>3</sup> Restoration of Afghanistan's full sovereignty is a narrative that can not only win the contest for the will of the people, but also bring all the potential opportunities together into a focused strategy to contain the risks.

A sovereignty strategy, as defined in my earlier work with Clare Lockhart,<sup>4</sup> entails the alignment of both internal and external stakeholders to the goals of the sovereign state through the joint formulation and calibration of, and adherence to, rules of the game. Once rules, objectives, and decision rights have been agreed on by citizens, state, and partners, resources are mobilized, critical tasks are designated, and reflexive monitoring and adjustment of implementation are put in place. The strategic goal is a sovereign state that is more autonomous and less dependent than before, can generate revenue self-sufficiently, and is fully capable of performing its core functions. In the long term, a sovereignty strategy should create, strengthen, or reform state institutions to perform all 10 core functions. In the short and medium term, however, a sovereignty strategy can include delegation of some critical tasks that fall within state functions to implementing partners by aligning the priorities, programs, and projects of international and national partners to the priorities and decisions of the state.

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disconnected from or an obstacle to reform in these provinces. If President Karzai, with his intimate knowledge and strong networks in the area, does not own and lead an agenda of reform in southern Afghanistan, the ISAF investment of forces and resources will be significantly constrained.

### **A New Narrative**

To capitalize on opportunities and avoid succumbing to constraints, leadership is required from both Afghanistan and our international partners. We must produce a new narrative that is compelling to the Afghan public and international publics and governments. Framing the conflict in terms of counterterrorism did not win the Afghan public because it was manifested on the ground as support for strongmen and tolerance of increasingly bad governance. The overwhelming support of the



The designation of July 2011 as the deadline for transition from U.S. to Afghan leadership of security institutions makes an overall sovereignty strategy a logical narrative to generate U.S. and Afghan public buy-in. This narrative would provide the Afghan public with a goal to strive for, while testing the leadership and commitment of the political elite and the capacity for sacrifice and compromise on the part of the population. The narrative would also allow the international community to shift its emphasis from abstract discussions of strategy and coordination to real agreement on actionable processes of coproduction of state functions ranging from public finance to rule of law and citizen rights and obligations. Such a framework of partnership would allow for joint delineation of timelines, benchmarks, and processes of transition to Afghan ownership, leadership, and management of institutions and functions, thereby providing the governments and publics of partner countries with concrete measures of progress and a real sense of momentum.

The July 2010 Kabul Conference was intended to be an arena for articulating clear objectives and reinforcing processes and mechanisms of implementation for a contract between citizens and their government, while renewing and strengthening Afghanistan's partnerships with the international community on a basis of mutual commitments and accountability. This would generate a strategy for sovereignty. Success depended on the political will of the Afghan government and willingness of the international community to change those aspects of their practices that have proven ineffective or counterproductive. To go beyond political theater, the conference requires followup in the form of a sequence of rolling 100-day action plans. It is the followup that is essential, both for generating momentum through perceptible successes and for achieving meaningful progress toward true Afghan sovereignty.

The scale of risks in Afghanistan is such that all challenges cannot be confronted simultaneously. Political capital must therefore be created and spent through a process of calibration, innovation, and learning. The desire of the absolute majority of Afghan men and women to live in peace and harmony, and their will to create better futures for their children, should not be underestimated. In that desire and will lies the promise that opportunities can be converted into real gains.

By owning the Afghan conflict, President Obama took a major risk and created a window of opportunity. It is up to Afghans and our international partners to demonstrate that the risk was worth taking by making the most of the opportunity presented. The future stability of Afghanistan, the region, and the world depends on our success. **PRISM**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *The U.S. Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3–24* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 139.

<sup>2</sup> See also Ashraf Ghani, *A Ten Year Framework for Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, April 2009).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>4</sup> For the following definition, see Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 174–197. For examples of

sovereignty strategies implemented in Afghanistan, see the National Solidarity Program, National Development Framework, and Securing Afghanistan's Future.