



Prospect for a Crisis in Post-2014 Afghanistan

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This report provides a snapshot of experts' views on possible scenarios that may unfold in Afghanistan after 2014. It also presents a brief overview of factors poised to shape the trajectory of the on-going transition and potential for a crisis in Afghanistan post-2014. Related information is available at www.cimicweb.org. Hyperlinks to source material are highlighted in blue and underlined in the text.

Afghanistan is amid transition which will set the stage for its future trajectory. The question of whether that trajectory will be relatively stable or whether Afghanistan is on a path to a renewed civil war has been a subject of vigorous and inconclusive debate. While scepticism coexists with great hope for the future of post-2014 Afghanistan, there currently remain many uncertainties about the future political, security and economic environment in the country. Notably, there is a combination of factors poised by different degrees to shape whether Afghanistan will slide back to a crisis or whether it will sustain itself on a stable enough path. Those factors include: a level of overall Western assistance, implications of inevitable foreign aid cuts, sustainability of the Afghan National Security Force (ANSF), the outcome of the 2014 elections, the prospect of a political settlement, future of the insurgency, and regional dynamics. In an effort to shed more light on a possible trajectory of Afghanistan after 2014, this report explores each of these intertwined and complex variables by synthesizing findings and debates of the research community on these issues and Afghanistan's post-2014 trajectory in general. The report demonstrates that while the outlook for post-2014 Afghanistan remains rather blurry - as many of the variables are currently in flux, unpredictable or unfolding - there has emerged a certain degree of consensus among experts on the potential developments in post-2014 Afghanistan.

Possible Scenarios

Citha D. Maass and Thomas Ruttig, experts of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) outline [four possible scenarios](#). In the first scenario, a situation in Afghanistan may evolve into "a fragile oligarchical system" held together by interdependence between the Afghan president and co-opted regional power brokers who would prevent an internal power struggle from spiralling into civil war in efforts to preserve their access to power and patronage. Under such a scenario, the Taliban would not be formally extended a share of power. The central government would be able to hold major urban centres while many



rural areas would fall under indirect control of the Taliban. Based on the second scenario, the power oligarchy would be extended to the Taliban and other insurgent groups as they would be formally integrated into the government. In both of these scenarios, the experts project that the political system “would continue to be burdened by inefficient, corrupt governance, a fragile balance of power, rampant crime, and the constant threat of civil war.” Under the third scenario, the Taliban could seize control of the capital and large parts of the country. In a final scenario, Afghanistan could descend into civil war of varying intensity.

According to some experts, descent into a civil war or falling under the Taliban’s complete control is not inevitable. A March 2013 working paper by the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS) projects [three likely outcomes](#): “a weak and divided state, a state that either devolves into regions controlled by power brokers or warlords, or one that comes under at least partial Taliban and extremist control.” Anthony H. Cordesman of CSIS projects that the ultimate result may be an Afghanistan that [fractures along ethnic](#), sectarian, and tribal lines. While this outcome would weaken the central government, it does not necessarily entail a victory for the Taliban and other insurgent groups since they too face many challenges, including internal frictions, lack of public support and limited influence in many parts of the country. According to Cordesman, “this may limit insurgent gains and control as well as mitigate the risk that Afghanistan will become a centre of terrorism.” Along similar lines, a different CSIS study projects that Afghanistan may achieve relative stability “based on some form of de facto [federalism or sharing of power](#) between the central government and given factions”. In other words, a fractured Afghanistan composed of national and local power blocs may still be able to hold the country together and contain the insurgent groups including the Taliban. While such an outcome is [far from desirable](#), it may be at least “strategically viable”, notes Cordesman in his 2013 Afghanistan field report. Similarly, Thomas Barfield, an expert from Boston University, assesses “Afghans’ dissatisfaction with a centralized [government] that cannot cope with the country’s regional diversity or with expectations for local self-rule” [could prompt](#) Afghanistan’s fragmentation.

Similarly, Toby Dodge of the International Institute of Strategic Studies (IISS) forecasts that the Afghan president will likely have to embrace the rules of Afghan politics that existed prior to 1979 in which “the centre returns to a mediating role between the regions.” The IISS study assesses that there appears to be [no alternative](#) to this outcome as international attention shifts elsewhere and access to financial assistance, that has bound an elite to the central government, diminishes. In his testimony to the British parliament in July 2012 Stuart Gordon forecasted a likely scenario of “somewhere towards status quo and [partial meltdown](#) in some areas, but with a central degree of authority and stability”. In contrast, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) anticipates “a [continued escalation](#) of violent conflict fuelled by the departure of foreign security forces and subsequent increased humanitarian need”.

As the number of post-2014 international forces drop, Kenneth Katzman of the Congressional Research Service (CRS) projects that [local militias](#) will likely re-form in their attempt to prevent the Taliban from returning. However, this could trigger ethnic and communal conflict, potentially resulting in a reversion to rule by faction leaders and a countrywide struggle for power.

Brian Michael Jenkins of RAND Corporation forecasts:

What eventually will happen, then, is [not clear](#). Ideally, the Afghan government will survive the economic crisis; the country will elect a new government as it is scheduled to do in 2014 and will hold its own militarily, although probably not to the nation’s frontiers. The Taliban



and the Haqqani Network will expand their area of influence, probably with assistance from Pakistan, while Afghan opponents of the Taliban and Pashtun domination will prepare their own defences. The civil war will escalate, and in a worst-case scenario, Afghanistan will descend into chaos—a giant Somalia in the heart of Asia.

While some observers draw parallels with the post-1989 situation which resulted in civil war, it is far from obvious whether the current situation will arrive at the same outcome. According to British Commons cross-party defence committee's chairman James Arbuthnot, experts who gave evidence to the committee concluded "there was a [50-50 chance](#) of Afghanistan descending into civil war." Given the current political and security situation in Afghanistan, the IISS volume "Afghanistan to 2015 and beyond" argues for "a cautious but highly [constrained optimism](#)," and projects that Afghanistan will not rapidly return to civil war. While the IISS' experts expect Afghanistan to remain weak and unstable, they assess that a rapid state collapse is unlikely because the "centre of government in Kabul has been reconstituted to the extent that it will manage to hold together, place limits on the ability of the insurgents to operate within the country and on external actors who seek to undermine internal instability." Following the withdrawal of Soviet forces in February 1989, contrary to widespread expectations at the time, Najibullah's unpopular regime was able to remain in power and hold on to the large cities for over three years thanks to continued Soviet military and economic assistance. According to IISS' experts, today, the central government has [more power](#) than Najibullah had in 1989-92 primarily because Afghan president Hamid Karzai has deployed financial resources to support elite who are dependent on him financially and politically. Secondly, the current government has also made strategic inroads into the Pashtun community and "this has the potential after 2015 to limit the Taliban's capacity to successfully launch a sustainable political and military offensive."

Drawing on the lessons-learned from the post-[Soviet withdrawal](#), Mark N. Katz of the Middle East Policy Council projects the following:

- Following the withdrawal of ISAF forces by the end of 2014, American and allied military and economic assistance to the Afghan government may enable it to maintain power in the major population centers.
- It is far from obvious that the Taliban will return to power, despite the likelihood that they will continue to receive Pakistani assistance so long as the Kabul government continues to receive significant aid from the US and its coalition allies.
- Opposition to the central government may decline after the ISAF forces withdraw. The effectiveness of Afghan government forces may rapidly increase once they are responsible for their own survival (as demonstrated after the Soviet withdrawal).
- The central government's power is likely to diminish rapidly if US and allied support ends.

Ultimately, as British Defence Secretary Philip Hammond and many other observers conclude, nobody can say "with certainty" what [the future for Afghanistan](#) will be. Despite this uncertainty, a mix of economic, political and security factors outlined below will shape the overall trajectory of post-2014 Afghanistan.

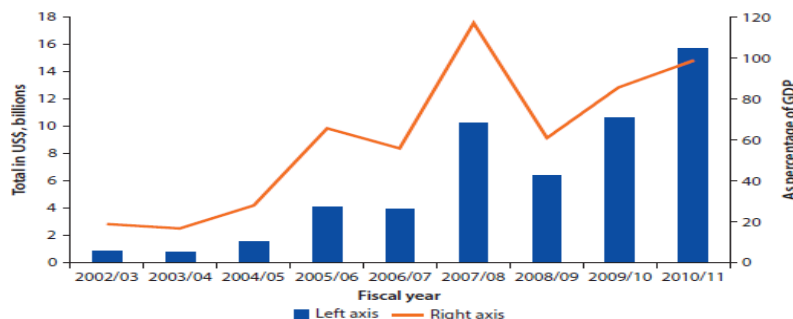


Economic Factors

Studies warn that fiscal dependency could [create risks](#) equal to the significant political and security risks Afghanistan is about to face. There is a consensus among experts that if aid is not phased out and managed through predictable and orderly means that would allow Afghanistan to absorb the impact, destabilising economic challenges will unfold after 2014, given that a massive inflow of aid has shaped Afghanistan's political economy for the last decade. A 2013 CSIS study warns “the greatest [adverse impact](#) of transition will be fiscal,” adding that the economics of transition, including the level of future US and other donor military and civilian aid will be critical “if Afghanistan is to have a chance of creating a reasonable level of post-2014 security and stability.” While developing “[even minimal stability](#)” will rely on aid efforts, the study cautions that, to date, public plans for the economic and aid aspects of transition have been largely lacking.

Over the last decade, Afghanistan has become “[an extreme outlier](#)” in its dependence on aid, according to the World Bank. A combination of foreign aid and military spending has been a [principal driver](#) of Afghan economic growth since 2002. A US Congressional Research Service (CRS) estimates¹ that foreign aid and military spending accounts for 90 per cent of Afghanistan's gross domestic product (GDP)² or at least [seven to eleven times](#) the revenue earning capacity of the Afghan government, according to a CSIS study (Figure 1). According to Anthony H. Cordesman of CSIS, it is not clear how significant the drop in outside assistance to Afghanistan will be by 2014 and beyond, but estimates of the reduction in current military spending range from [70-90 per cent](#). A 2013 World Bank study warns that if not managed carefully, the [inevitable cuts](#) will trigger a major recession by 2014 – the same year Afghanistan is scheduled to hold an election and rely completely on Afghan forces for its security. A 2011 World Bank study echoes this warning by noting “abrupt aid cut-offs lead to [fiscal implosion](#), loss of control over security sector, collapse of political authority, and possibly civil war”. International experience nonetheless shows that the Afghan economy could absorb the aid cuts without going through crisis – as long as the decline in aid is gradual and predictable.

Figure I. Aid Trends in Afghanistan



Source: This figure excludes spending on international military forces. “[Afghanistan in Transition: Looking beyond 2014](#),” World Bank, 2013.

¹ The World Bank warns that since collecting reliable data on Afghanistan is extremely difficult “the information that is available is subject to [large margins of uncertainty](#)”.

² The US is estimated to have provided 62 per cent of the aid, while other donors provided 28 per cent. The Afghan government collected around 11 per cent of its GDP, or approximately USD 2 billion, in revenues in 2011. The country received around USD 15.7 billion in aid in 2010-2011.

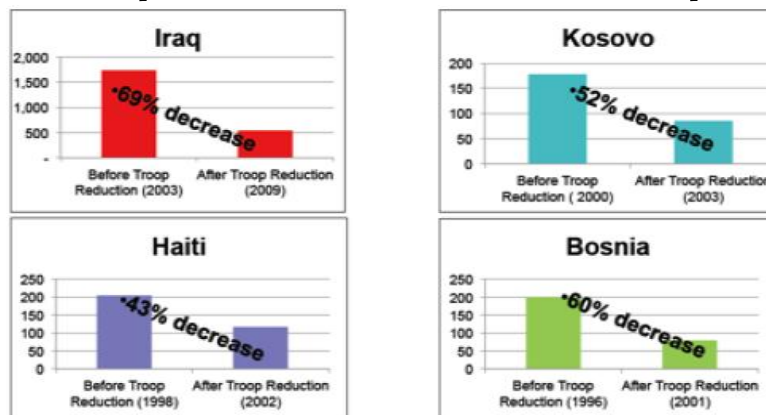


Given Afghanistan's post-2014 revenue/expenditure estimates, the country will likely continue to depend on donors through at least 2024. A joint 2012 World Bank-IMF report anticipates a USD [70 billion financing gap](#) between 2015 and 2024. Similarly, the 2013 World Bank study projects a [financing gap](#) of 40 per cent of the GDP in 2014-2015, dropping to 25 per cent in 2020-2025. This means that without continued, substantial international funding for security – even if security costs decline – the Afghan government will have to resort to significant expenditure cuts as money will not be available for security forces, equipment or development. In Spring of 2013, the World Bank estimated that aid [dependence issues](#) could become more serious if any of the following were to occur: decrease in security, a political crisis in 2014 or beyond, rains destroying the agricultural sector, high capital flight, increase in corruption, and lack of visible reform and stability to Afghan and outside investors in post-2014.

Donor Fatigue

Although analysts project that Afghanistan will depend on outside assistance through at least 2024 to sustain gains of the last decade, it remains unclear how much aid will be forthcoming in the long term. At the July 2012 Tokyo Conference, the international community pledged USD 4 billion a year in civil assistance through 2015 to close the fiscal gap between Afghanistan's domestic public revenues and expenditures – if certain reforms are met. This USD 16 billion will supplement [donor pledges](#) of USD 3.6 billion in security assistance through 2017 committed in the run up to the May 2012 Chicago Summit.³ Analysts nonetheless project “[donor fatigue](#)” will pose a significant threat to Afghan stability since, even during the peak of donors' commitment to Afghanistan between 2002 and 2009, only [43.1](#) per cent of pledged aid for reconstruction was disbursed, according to a 2011 study “Afghanistan: Tracking Major Resource Flows, 2002-2010”. An April 2013 CSIS study notes that [historical precedents](#) also indicate that a withdrawal or significant reduction in troop levels tend to be followed by substantial reductions in aid as witnessed by Bosnia, Haiti, Iraq and Kosovo (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Development Assistance Levels Before and After Troop Reductions



Source: “Afghanistan: Toward an Enduring Partnership,” USAID, January 2011. Extracted from “[The Afghan War in 2013: Afghan Economics and Outside Aid](#),” CSIS, April 2013.

³ In addition to USD 3.6 billion, the Afghan government committed USD 500 million annually in security assistance through 2017, bringing the total amount to USD 4.1 billion. As envisioned at the Chicago Summit, this amount is estimated to cover a force of 228,500. Based on the [Chicago Summit Declaration](#), it is anticipated that Afghanistan's yearly share will increase progressively from USD 500 million in 2015, so that it can assume full financial responsibility for its security forces no later than 2024.

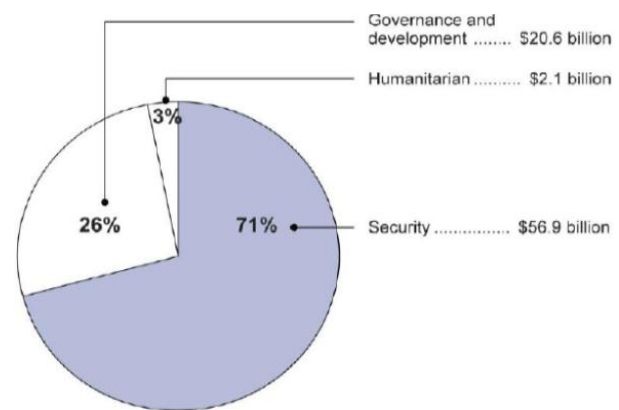


Uneven Effect of Aid Cuts

Implications of diminishing aid will be distributed unevenly, according to the 2013 World Bank study. The impact of declining aid on economic growth may be tempered by the fact that most international aid is not spent “in” Afghanistan; much of it exits the economy through imports, profits of contractors and remittances. While disruption in service delivery will likely affect everyone, the study projects that a direct impact of declining aid on the poor is likely to be modest because only a fraction of aid reaches the poor – the majority of aid was directed not to reducing poverty but to improving security and governance (Figure 3). The study estimates that aid and military spending directly affects only six to ten per cent of the population. However, this percentage includes political leaders, the leading civil and security elite, including power brokers – all of whom in turn have the greatest impact on security and stability. Historical precedents demonstrate “elite groups’ adaptations to declining aid and associated realignments and dislocations could be violent and destabilizing”, says the World Bank.

CSIS and World Bank studies warn that cuts in aid funding and military spending will inevitably take place in politically high-risk and conflict-affected areas rather than throughout the country as a whole as these areas have been the principal recipients of the funds. According to working studies, around eighty per cent of the total mix of aid and military spending goes to operations rather than development in conflict areas in south and east Afghanistan (Figure 3 and 4). Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) and military forces manage aid in most of these areas. Thus, removing outside forces and civil-military aid teams will impact such combat districts far more heavily than the country as a whole. Anthony Cordesman warns that abrupt cuts in funding can have “serious security and political impacts” since there are hundreds of thousands of armed Afghans currently dependent on outside funding⁴. To date, a large amount of aid has gone to the Afghan local police force and armed pro-government militias. As William Byrd points out, history in general, and Afghanistan’s history after the Soviet military withdrawal in 1989 in particular, demonstrates that unpredictable and abrupt cut-offs are highly destabilising from a fiscal, political and security perspective – even if the direct economic effects are more modest. The abrupt cut-off of Soviet aid to the Najibullah regime triggered widespread defection of pro-government militias and the army leading to the government’s collapse. Similarly, an abrupt cut-off of Somali aid the late 1980s led to “a fiscal crisis, desertion of security forces (who were no longer paid), and rapid collapse of the state.”

Figure 3. US Aid by Sectors: 2002-2012

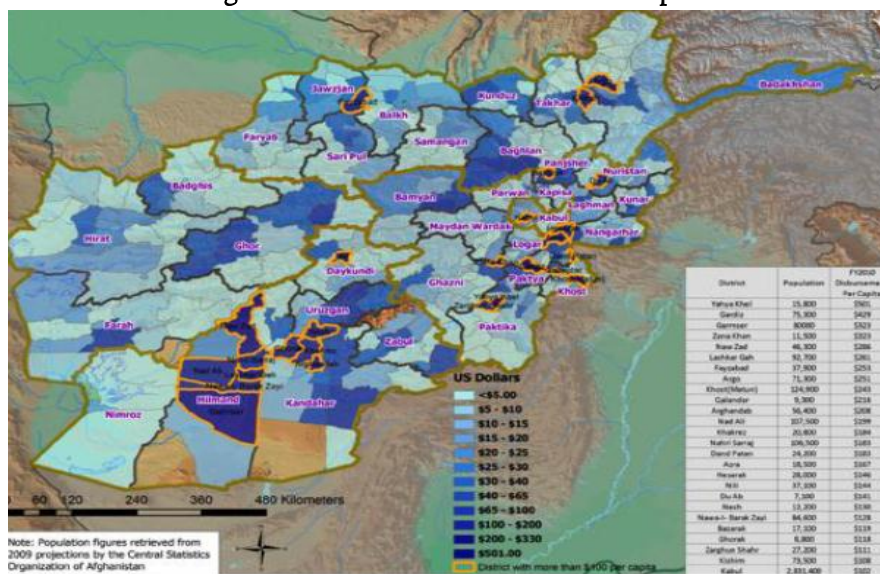


Source: “Afghanistan: Key Oversight Issues,” GAO, February 2013.

⁴ Armed militias of local powerbrokers, for instance, protect ISAF’s military convoys, bases, etc. through their private security companies.



Figure 4. USAID Disbursement Per Capita



Source: “US Aid to Afghanistan and Pakistan at a Glance,” USAID, 2010. Extracted from Anthony H. Cordesman, “*The Afghan War in 2013: Afghan Economics and Outside Aid*,” CSIS, April 2013.

Alternatives to Foreign Aid

The Afghan economy has few areas for sustainable growth after 2014 when foreign aid is certain to decline. The exploitation of the country’s mineral wealth represents “[the only realistic](#)” medium-term option for sharply increasing Afghanistan’s revenues, according to Nicholas Redman of IISS. While the estimated USD 1 trillion of untapped mineral deposits has the potential to drive the economy, the March 2013 World Bank study indicates that mining will deliver major benefits after [2018 at the earliest](#) – if post-2014 security and political conditions do not discourage investment. “It will take 10-20 years of steady investment and development on the ground to have a [meaningful impact](#), although important progress could be made in 5-10 years in peaceful and stable areas if Afghanistan can create an investment climate attractive to outside investors,” according to a CSIS study on “Afghan Economics and Outside Aid”. The entire mining sector currently accounts for less than 1 per cent of GDP. The World Bank study notes the main priority is the materialisation of Aynak and Hajigak along with other large-scale mining projects. While the countries in the region may play a positive role by improving rail links, pipelines, and power grids, along with investment and reductions in national barriers to trade⁵, “they will [not yield benefits in time](#) to have a serious macroeconomic impact on the Afghan economy before 2018 under anything like current conditions,” according to April 2013 CSIS study. There is a consensus among experts that as aid and military spending in the country declines, narcotics production may become an even more powerful source of revenue for warlords and the population in general after 2014.

Political Factors

As in post-conflict transitions elsewhere, political stability along with effective political leadership will be as crucial as the aforementioned economic dimension for Afghanistan during transition and beyond 2014. However, the World Bank warns that based on indicators such as [political stability](#) and consolidation, rule of

⁵ The combination of all these projects is dubbed the “New Silk Road”.



law, and government effectiveness, “Afghanistan’s recent performance has been on a downward trend.” The January 2013 [Quarterly Report](#) by SIGAR and studies by [Catherine Dale](#) and [Kenneth Katzman](#) of CRS warn that effective governance at the provincial, district and local level will continue to be a serious issue in many areas. Corruption will continue to be a significant impediment to any effective rule of law, with Afghanistan ranking [174th out of 176 countries](#), adjacent to Somalia, on Transparency International’s Corruption Perception Index, which categorizes countries at the bottom of the index as “largely failed states”. Ian Livingston and Michael O’Hanlon of the Brookings Institution project that in post-2014, corruption among government officials will likely [further compromise](#) the government’s legitimacy.

Anthony H. Cordesman of CSIS projects:

[Leadership](#) and unity will become steadily more important as aid funds are cut, patronage decreases, and the president becomes more dependent on local and regional leaders while having less money to spend. Moreover, the quality of regional leadership and the willingness of regional leaders to work together and meet popular needs and expectations will become equally critical. The key political question that will determine the success of Transition after 2014 will not simply be the leader in [Kabul], it will be who remains in actual power in the rest of the country, how well they can actually counter the Taliban and other insurgents, and how well they cooperate with other power brokers.

Elections in 2014

The presidential election scheduled for April 2014 will be a critical factor shaping the prospects for crisis in post-2014 Afghanistan. In his testimony to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, a director of New American Foundation, Peter Bergen, expressed “If that election is perceived as being relatively free and fair this would go a long [way to ease tensions](#) in the Afghan body politic, increase Afghanistan’s overall security, and reassure both Afghan and outside investors that the country has a promising future.” Conversely, if the elections are perceived as unfair and contested, “this would likely precipitate a vicious circle of conflict, deteriorating security, and capital flight.” However, the International Crisis Group (ICG) warns that under current conditions, “It is a near certainty” that [massive fraud](#) could compromise the 2014 elections. The ICG also projects that high levels of violence across the country expected before and on the day of polls could disenfranchise many would-be voters. United States Institute of Peace (USIP) analysts, however, caution that Afghans are much more concerned about the [uncertainty](#) of the impending political transition and the actual outcomes of the elections rather than with a “free and fair” elections process. Respondents to their March 2013 field study interviews perceived elections as a hazardous process likely to encourage renewed political chaos with potential for civil war after ISAF withdraws and current coalitions between ethnic leaders and the central government break apart. Along similar lines, Brookings Institution experts assess that the electoral process has the potential to intensify ethnic tensions between the Pashtuns and the minority Tajik, and between Uzbeks and Hazaras and therefore “[could easily divide](#) Afghans more than unite them”.

According to a March 2013 CSIS study, elections matter to the extent they demonstrate to the Afghan people that there is a new leader who is willing to try to “[moderate](#) the current system, that he will break up the current factional structure of power, and that he has the support of a broad range of Afghan factions. In fact, it is the willingness of these factions to come together before or after the election that will probably be far more critical than the election itself.” The study indicates that some senior Afghans believe stability will not be



determined by the election but a new agreement among power brokers, with others suggesting that the result of the election may be a weak government, and regions under power broker control.

Based on his March 2013 [field trip](#) to Afghanistan, Cordesman of CSIS states:

...one would hope, but one can never be sure, that when almost all of the Afghans you talk to mention they can't repeat that mistake of going to war with each other, that some of them, at least, are serious. But again, the election and the coalition that follows will be a key indicator. We are going to have some form of strategic warning.

Peace Process

A negotiated political settlement would be a welcome outcome to the conflict in Afghanistan. Analysts agree that a peaceful transfer of power at the end of Karzai's presidency in 2014 will be a critical factor in determining the country's prospect for crisis in post-2014. As precedents such as Mozambique, Rwanda, Cambodia and Mali suggest, state consolidation based on "[inclusive enough](#)" coalitions was vital for successful transition and relative post-transition stability, notes the 2013 World Bank study. Since 2010, the US and the Afghan governments changed their approach and became [open to negotiations](#) with the Taliban, according to the Council on Foreign Relations. While there are reports of informal discussions between the Afghan government and senior Taliban commanders, experts for the most part agree that there have been few signs that these informal talks would lead to a breakthrough. Similarly, a RAND Corporation study on the subject concludes that interests and objectives of parties involved [vary greatly](#) and therefore "arriving at an agreement about the sequencing, timing, and prioritization of peace terms will likely to be difficult." According to an ICG study, Karzai's government is [not well positioned](#) to reach a deal with leaders of the insurgency, and consequently current talks with the Taliban will likely not result in a sustainable peace. Moreover, even if the Taliban's leadership consents to a negotiated peace, there are other insurgent groups, most importantly the Haqqani network, that are "more than capable of derailing the Afghan peace."

Opinion polls by the Asia Foundation in 2012 show [overwhelming support](#) within Afghan society for a negotiated settlement which would incorporate the Taliban and other groups into power in some fashion.⁶ However, according to Brian M. Jenkins of RAND Corporation, it is rather doubtful that the Taliban would be willing to sever their relations with al Qaeda in return for [political concessions](#), concluding "It makes sense for the insurgents to simply wait," given the US commitment to withdraw all combat forces by 2014. Jenkins cautions "it seems unrealistic to expect that the insurgents, some of whom have been fighting for the better part of two decades, would feel pressured to compromise their objectives. While there have been some talks with Taliban leaders, the Taliban are likely to see political negotiations, not as an alternative to armed struggle but simply as a parallel path to the departure of foreign troops and the insurgents' eventual return to power."

According to the expert on Afghanistan, Antonio Giustozzi, despite the peace negotiations effort, it is [difficult to imagine](#) how a government comprising representatives of all factions, ranging from the secular progressives to the Taliban, could even function. However, considering the limited functionality of the present government such an option "might be seen as acceptable, both internally and externally, as long as it brings the war to an end." Lastly, according to Carnegie Endowment's expert, Sarah Chayes, even if power-sharing arrangements

⁶ [81 per cent of respondents](#) are in favor of the government's national reconciliation and negotiation efforts, with 38 per cent "strongly in favor".



as described in November 2012 “[Peace Process Roadmap to 2015](#)” materialise, it will not necessarily promise stability and may “[drive] Afghanistan back to pre-9/11 conditions. Pakistan, after cultivating extremist groups with precisely this objective in view, would regain [indirect hegemony](#) over its neighbour.”

In contrast, some experts from research centres located in Afghanistan and Pakistan⁷ view chances for reconciliation in more positive light, arguing that the Taliban of today is not the same as it was a decade ago. According to these experts, the [Taliban](#) are open to negotiations since they lost strength, power, legitimacy and a former level of support from Pakistan. At the same time, they assess that Pakistan now has a stake in a stable Afghanistan as Pakistan faces its own political, economic and insurgent problems.

Security Factors

It is unknown to what extent the ANSF will be able to defend Afghanistan as foreign forces withdraw. Experts from the [IISS](#), [CSIS](#), the [Brookings Institution](#) and RAND Corporation project that the ANSF will probably maintain control over the territory cleared together with ISAF or at least over the major cities and roads, and lose some ground to the insurgency, but the force should not collapse. Some of these projections, however, assume that there will not be a marked increase in insurgent activity after 2014 and that West will provide sufficient military aid and support in-country beyond 2014. A decision on the size and composition of the US and other NATO nations’ post-2014 force and overall level of aid assistance is [yet to be made](#). Cordesman of CSIS, however, warns that the Afghan government “cannot possibly [fund effective ANSF](#) unless the US and outside donor nations foot most of the bill.”⁸

However, a February 2013 CSIS study cautions that there are too many [key factors yet to unfold](#) before one can accurately estimate the probability of military success. These factors include the quality of Afghan leadership, progress in the different parts of the ANSF⁹ and a level of continued outside aid and support. Drawing on the post-Soviet lessons, William Byrd of USIP cautions that holding on to the capital and large cities “is probably the most that can be [hoped for](#)”. Steady flow of aid will be crucial because as Cordesman warned during his Testimony to the House Armed Service Committee: “Vietnam did not collapse because of [force quality](#). Najibullah did not fall because the Afghan forces supporting him lacked training, equipment, and sustainability [after Soviet withdrawal]. He fell because he could no longer pay for the military and pay off tribal militias.” However, experts on Afghanistan such as Olga Olikier of RAND Corporation and William Byrd of USIP caution that while Najibullah was able to control the country by paying off and arming militias while exploiting divisions within the mujahedeen who turned against each other after the Soviet withdrawal, this [highly risky](#) approach worked in the short term. Those co-opted by Najibullah switched sides and turned against the government when the opposing side was willing to offer a higher price or when funding ceased – as it did in 1991. Also, the World Bank warns that this approach, dubbed as a “[political marketplace](#)”, where

⁷ The views by experts from research institutions located in Afghanistan and Pakistan have been solicited by Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS) in their study entitled “[Taliban Talks: Past, Present and Prospects for the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan](#)”.

⁸ According a February 2013 GAO report, [donors funded about 95 per cent](#) of Afghanistan’s total security expenditures, with the US funding around 91 per cent of that amount between 2006 and 2011. Even if the Afghan government “committed 100 percent of its projected revenues to funding ANSF, this amount would cover only about 75 percent of the cost of supporting security forces in fiscal year 2015 and would leave the Afghan government no revenues to cover any non-security-related programs, such as public health.”

⁹ For the assessment of the [current state of the ANSF](#) see “Statement of General Joseph F. Dunford, Commander US Forces-Afghanistan, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Situation in Afghanistan”, issued on 16 April, 2013.



factionalism and short-term patronage prevail, “can lead to endemic high levels of violence”. Regional “spoilers” often perpetuate such conflicts, as cases of post-Soviet Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of Congo and Sudan illustrate.

The CSIS study titled “The Uncertain Role of the ANSF in Transition” evaluates the [risks the ANSF](#) may potentially face:

...mix of weak central governance, weaker and divided governance in the field, real rule by local power brokers and tribal factions, and corruption does not mean Afghanistan cannot function after Transition, but it does mean that the ANSF will be under intense, and potentially divisive political pressure. Key elements may divide along regional, ethnic, and power broker lines and the relative influence in Pashtun areas will be critical in checking the insurgents. The next president risks becoming steadily more isolated in Kabul, tied to regional and ethnic factions, and/or forced to try to use the ANSF to preserve personal power. Saigon and Baghdad are practical examples of the potential extremes.

The IISS volume warns that a sharp reduction in foreign aid and Western assistance would place added [strain on the ANSF](#). This strain would lead to a decline in security and adversely affect the economy and confidence in the government. The cumulative outcome would be “a rapid weakening of the national government that would undermine the confidence of the Afghans and neighbouring states which would be far more likely to return to the established practice of backing their traditional allies in the country’s ethnic communities, rather than a national government.”

Insurgency

Regarding the overall level of post-2014 insurgency¹⁰ in Afghanistan, it is not clear to what extent insurgents will [lose motivation](#) with the departure of foreign troops, concludes the IISS volume. Those driven by resistance to foreign forces could pursue a negotiated settlement after the majority of foreign troops withdraw. At the same time, “it is difficult to predict the extent to which transition to Afghan security leadership will provide fighters with the motivation to re-join the political process, since many consider the government illegitimate.”

On a positive note, RAND Corporation and [Brookings Institution](#) experts emphasise that in contrast to the 1990s when a war-weary population might have believed the Taliban’s promises of security, today “the overwhelming majority of [Afghans] are [strongly opposed](#) to a return of an Islamic emirate” as they wish to retain social and material gains that they have made since 2001. In sum, Afghans are better off today than a decade ago, and while the current government has been far from perfect, the Taliban government [barely functioned](#), according to Oxfam. As poverty increased as a result of Taliban rule, access to even the most basic services was extremely limited. Similarly, Zubair Popalzai, Deputy Head of Research at the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul notes “Afghanistan is [not the same as in the 1990s](#), people’s perceptions and expectations have changed and increased and the nature of support the Taliban were receiving has diminished and changed”. Ashraf Ali, director of FATA Research Centre in Islamabad also assessed that today’s Taliban

¹⁰ According to Shanthie Mariet D’Souza of the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), the present-day [Taliban-led insurgency](#) is composed of various anti-government elements (ACE) and armed opposition forces (AOF) most salient of which include radical group Hizb-i-Islami, the Haqqani network, al Qaeda and its affiliates, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU).



lack [“the same strength](#), power or legitimacy,” compared to the 1990s. In addition, polls conducted by the Asia Foundation in 2012 indicate Taliban unpopularity as “for the first time in this survey, the Taliban was the most frequently cited [cause of crime](#) and insecurity in the country”.

At the same time, in his April 2013 [“Statement on the Situation on Afghanistan”](#) for the US Senate Armed Services Committee, General Joseph Dunford, Commander of ISAF warned that while less capable and popular, the Afghan Taliban and all its sub-groups remain capable of launching high profile attacks. Dunford assesses “the Taliban remain firm in their conviction that ISAF’s drawdown and perceived ANSF weakness, especially when supplemented with continued external support and sanctuary in Pakistan and the Taliban exploit, will translate into a restoration of their pre-surge military capabilities and influence”.

Threat of al Qaeda

It was the al Qaeda threat that brought the US, and its allies, to Afghanistan to ensure that the country would never become a haven for terrorism. Therefore, debate about the degree to which Afghanistan is critical to al Qaeda’s terrorist campaign, and the potential level of protection and assistance the Taliban would offer al Qaeda if the insurgent groups expanded their control or even took over the government is inextricably linked to potential instability in post-2014 Afghanistan.

Even if the Afghan Taliban regains some ground, it is not certain they would welcome “or [even tolerate](#)” the establishment of al Qaeda bases in the territory they may control after 2014, assesses the director of Transnational Threats and Political Risks at IISS, Nigel Inkster. He concludes, “Today, al Qaeda has little to offer the Taliban.” According to Inkster, fewer than 100 al Qaeda operatives are active in Afghanistan with most of them providing support for the Afghan Taliban and Haqqani network. Al Qaeda has been weakened in the decade since 9/11 and is believed to face funding problems; it is more like “a parasite organization” with its top leaders depending on the support and patronage of several key figures for security. However, Seth G. Jones of RAND Corporation warns that while al Qaeda lacks the legitimacy and power to establish a [sanctuary in Afghanistan](#) and Pakistan on its own, “it has attempted to leverage local militant networks in the region.” In addition, General Dunford assessed in his April 2013 testimony that al Qaeda’s relationship with local Afghan Taliban [“remains intact”](#).

Moreover, according Inkster, the Taliban leadership suffers from fragmentation with the head of the Taliban, Mullah Omar, showing [signs of distancing](#) himself from al Qaeda. A Kandahar-based expert on the Taliban assesses “in the last three years, the Taliban have taken considerable care in their public statements to [distance](#) themselves implicitly from al Qaeda while offering clear indications of their disaffection with the foreign militants in private”. Inkster also argues that the Taliban was essentially fighting a geographically confined war, suggesting that only ties to bin Laden took it to the global level. The study points out that 9/11 attacks, and the response they elicited, “were realization of the worst fears of the Taliban government”. However, al Qaeda in Afghanistan can still rely on the support of the [Haqqani network](#), which from its base in Pakistan, controls the eastern approaches to Kabul. The Haqqani network “enjoys a unique position because it lies beyond the reach of the Afghan military and is sympathetic to international terrorism, but does not directly threaten Pakistan and hence enjoys the support of the ISI.” It is not clear whether the Haqqani network can be neutralised or is willing to negotiate.

A 2012 RAND Corporation study suggests that a gradual US withdrawal will not suddenly empower al Qaeda. However, the study did suggest that the network would definitely benefit from [Taliban success](#) mainly because the network could recruit for new operations in Central Asia “if not [becoming] a new launching pad for



terrorist attacks.” While Afghanistan is not essential to al Qaeda since it can launch attacks from field commands in Yemen, Iraq, and North Africa and allies in Somalia and Pakistan, the RAND Corporation study warns that al Qaeda’s leaders do attribute significant importance to Afghanistan. Even if a victorious Taliban prevented al Qaeda from using Afghanistan as a launch pad for terrorist operations, the study projects “a Taliban victory in Afghanistan would guarantee Al-Qaeda’s survival.”

While Iraq’s circumstances differ from Afghanistan and Pakistan, a March 2013 RAND Corporation testimony uses the [experience in Iraq](#) to illustrate potential risks of a hastened or a complete US military withdrawal for destabilisation of Afghanistan post-2014. The study warns that the complete US withdrawal from Iraq has allowed al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) to recover. By early 2013, AQI was involved in an average of thirty suicide and car bomb attacks per month, an increase of fifty per cent from 2011 levels – the last year US forces were in Iraq. In addition, AQI has established a foothold in Syria since the US departure. Consequently, the study projects that the combination of a precipitous US withdrawal and continuing Pakistani support to Afghan insurgents “could lead to Taliban control of part or more of Afghanistan over the next decade”.

Role of Regional States

Afghanistan is encircled by stronger neighbours who have historically jockeyed for relative power in Afghanistan. Over the past three decades, these neighbours, including most importantly Pakistan, India and Iran, supported zealous insurgencies prepared to topple the regime in Kabul. Regional dynamics will be equally critical to determining the prospect for crisis in post-2014 Afghanistan. As James Shinn and James Dobbins of RAND Corporation remind, historically, Afghanistan had enjoyed peace when “its neighbours perceive a [common interest](#) in keeping that peace” but fell to war “when one or more of those neighbours saw some advantage therein.” Whether the neighbouring states and other regional stakeholders will play a spoiler role, remains sharply disputed among experts. While many analysts argue that regional states, most significantly Pakistan, will likely continue to fuel the [insurgency](#) by backing their respective proxies in Afghanistan as they have done previously, the IISS volume projects that Afghanistan will likely not become a site for the [proxy conflicts](#) of the regional states as it was the case in the 1990s.

The IISS volume concludes that, despite frictions, today’s regional situation is [more favourable](#) for Afghanistan compared to 1989-92 because most of Afghanistan’s neighbours and the regional powers support the Afghan central government rather than their respective allies among the country’s ethnic groups. In addition, there are some signs that Pakistan and India are starting to deviate from their long-held positions. In recent years, Pakistan talked in terms of “not wishing to repeat the mistake of the 1990s” when it promoted a Taliban seizure of the country. At the same time, India seems to be shifting its focus on “the predominantly economic nature of its interests in Afghanistan”, and its Research and Analysis Wing appears to be scaling down its presence in Afghanistan and cooperation with the Afghan National Directorate of Security directed against Pakistan. “[W]hether these moves can avoid floundering on the rock of Kashmir, as has been the case with a succession of previous peace initiatives, remains at best uncertain.”

In an effort to check arch-rival India, Pakistan continues to have the greatest capacity to destabilise Afghanistan after 2014. However, some experts, including Rahul Roy-Chaudhury of IISS and Peter Berger of New America Foundation argue that the country is shifting policies against the backdrop of increased [terrorism at home](#), contending it is not in Pakistan’s interest to see Afghanistan collapse into a new civil war thereby destabilizing Pakistan. The IISS volume notes “the encouragement of militants fighting in Afghanistan has [unwittingly encouraged](#) the [domestic] growth of insurgents committed to the overthrow of Pakistan”.



However, the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) cautions that if the US maintains a [low presence](#), other actors may still try to fill the power vacuum and exert greater political influence. Such a situation could resemble that of the 1990s when Afghan civil war factions received considerable support of neighbouring countries. Similarly, William Byrd of USIP cautions that the possibility of Afghanistan's neighbours again playing "spoiler" roles remains "[very real](#)".

Conclusion

Experts' views on the prospect for a crisis in post-2014 Afghanistan remain mixed. While some views reflect highly cautious optimism if certain conditions are met, it is clear that all options, including Afghanistan's relapse into a civil war after 2014 or a renewed Taliban "emirate" remain viable trajectories after 2014. Although many of the factors that will determine whether Afghanistan will remain on a "stable enough" path are unpredictable or unfolding, money flow will be a critical determinant in many aspects. For most of its recent history, Afghanistan relied on financial and other support – and post-2014 will be without exception. While aid cuts are inevitable and, in the long term, perhaps beneficent to the country, there is an unwavering consensus among experts that any abrupt or unpredictable withdrawal of outside assistance will, more than likely, be a precursor to crisis.



Annex A. Resources on Prospect for a Crisis in Post-2014 Afghanistan

Readers interested in this issue may wish to refer to the following documents, several of which have been specifically referenced in the preceding text.

- [Afghanistan: Development progress and prospects after 2014](#), House of Commons International Development Committee, October 2012.
- [Afghanistan: Key Oversight Issues](#), United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), February 2013.
- [Afghanistan: The long, hard road to the 2014 transition](#), International Crisis Group, October 2012.
- Anthony H. Cordesman, [Afghanistan: Meeting the Real World Challenges of Transition](#), CSIS, January 2013.
- Anthony H. Cordesman, [The Uncertain Role of the ANSF in Transition](#), CSIS, February 2013.
- Anthony H. Cordesman, [The Afghan War in 2013: Meeting the Challenges of Transition Volume II: Afghan Economics and Outside Aid](#), CSIS, April 2013.
- Anthony H. Cordesman, [The Challenges of Leadership and Governance: The Afghan War in 2013; Meeting the Challenges of Transition – Volume I](#), CSIS, March 2013.
- Anthony H. Cordesman, [Afghanistan in Transition: A Trip Report](#), CSIS, March 2013.
- Anthony H. Cordesman, [Transition in the Afghanistan-Pakistan War: How does this war end](#), CSIS, January 2011.
- Antonio Giustozzi, [Negotiating with the Taliban: Issues and Prospects](#), The Century Foundation, 2010.
- Barbara J. Stapleton, [Beating a Retreat: Prospects for the Transition Process in Afghanistan](#), Afghanistan Analysts Network, January 2012.
- Brian Michael Jenkins, “[Al Qaeda in Its Third Decade: Irreversible Decline or Imminent Victory?](#)” RAND, 2012.
- Citha D. Maas, Thomas Ruttig, [Is Afghanistan on the Brink of a New Civil War?](#) Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs),” 2011.
- Catherine Dale, [Next Steps in the War in Afghanistan? Issues for Congress](#), CRS, December 2012.
- James Dobbins and James Shinn, [Afghanistan: Guidelines for a Peace Process](#), Survival, 53(4), 2011.
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- Kenneth Katzman, [Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance](#), Security, and U.S. Policy, Congressional Research Service, March 2013.
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- [Key Findings – Afghanistan in 2012: A Survey of the Afghan People](#), The Asian Foundation, November 2012.
- Lydia Poole, [Afghanistan: Tracking Major Resource Flows: 2002 – 2010](#), Global Humanitarian Assistance Briefing Paper, January 2011.
- Mark N. Katz, [Lessons of the Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan](#), Middle East Policy Council, March 2011.
- Mona K. Sheiks and Maja T. J. Greenwood ed., [Taliban Talks: Past, Present and Prospects for the US, Afghanistan and Pakistan](#), Danish Institute for International Studies, February 2013.
- Noah Coburn, Anna Larson, [Justifying the Means: Afghan Perceptions of Electoral Processes](#), United States Institute of Peace, March 2013.
- Olga Oliker, [Building Afghanistan’s Security Forces in Wartime: The Soviet Experience](#), RAND, 2011.
- Richard Hogg, Claudia Nassif, Camilo Gomez Osorio, William Byrd, and Andrew Beath, [Afghanistan in Transition: Looking beyond 2014](#), World Bank, February 2013.



- Seth G. Jones, After the Withdrawal: [A Way Forward in Afghanistan and Pakistan](#): Testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Committee, RAND, March 2013.
- [Talking about Talks: Toward a Political Settlement in Afghanistan](#), International Crisis Group March 2012.
- Vanda Felbab-Brown, [Slip-Sliding on a Yellow Brick Road: Stabilization Efforts in Afghanistan](#), The Brookings Institution, October/November 2012.
- Sarah Chayes, [Afghanistan's Roadmap to the Past](#), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2012.
- [The Cost of War: Afghan Experiences of Conflict, 1978 – 2009](#), OXFAM, November 2009.
- Thomas Ruttig, [The Battle for Afghanistan: Negotiations with the Taliban](#), New America Foundation, May 2011.
- Tody Dodge and Nicholas Redman ed., “Afghanistan to 2015 and Beyond,” IISS, New York: Routledge, 2011.
- [Transition in Afghanistan Looking Beyond 2014](#), World Bank, November 2011.
- William Byrd, [Lessons from Afghanistan's History for the Current Transition and Beyond](#), United States Institute of Peace (USIP), September 2012.
- William Byrd, [Ten lessons the U.S. should learn from Afghanistan's history](#), Foreign Policy, October 2012.