



**LESSONS
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Afghanistan Partnership Framework

Conditionality without ownership; tactics without strategy?

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Mr. McKechnie worked for twenty eight years in various World Bank positions, his previous position being Country Director for Afghanistan, Bhutan, and Maldives in the South Asia Region. Other positions include Operations Director for the South Asia Region, where in addition to his work on Afghanistan, he assisted the Vice President for the region and oversaw the Bank's operations in South Asia; Energy Sector Director South Asia region, responsible for the Bank's energy operations in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka; Division Chief for Energy, Infrastructure and Private-Sector Development in the Mashreq, Egypt and Iran Department in the Middle East/North Africa region. After the Asian tsunami disaster in 2004, he coordinated the World Bank's response to the South Asia region.

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Mr Bowden was appointed CMG in the 2017 Birthday honours for his services to Humanitarian Assistance.

Introduction

This brief evaluates the second draft of the Afghanistan Partnership Framework for Development agreement (APF), which is due to be proposed at the 2020 Afghanistan Conference in Geneva on 23-24 November 2020. International partners are being invited to comment on successive iterations of the agreement, and this brief has been prepared to help inform their thinking. It draws attention to shortcomings with the current version (as of 30/10/2020) and suggests ways in which it could be improved to better ensure long-term peace, stability, and confidence in both partner countries and Afghanistan.

The APF will be the fourth in a series of compacts between Afghanistan and its international partners. These agreements have supported considerable advances in human well-being, development and governance in the country. Monitoring of previous compacts have shown that they largely met their stated aims, and since the beginning of the international engagement in 2002, Afghanistan has made considerable improvements in health, education, infrastructure services and public administration. Yet surveys of the Afghan people by the Asia Foundation show that while two-thirds believe the National Unity Government is doing a good job, only 36% believe the country is going in the right direction, primarily due to insecurity and crime, the economy and the state of governance, including corruption (Asia Foundation, 2019).

Security remains a major challenge despite trillions of dollars of expenditure, with foreign-backed insurgents controlling 14% of the population and contesting control over another 40% (Roggio and Gutowski, n.d.). The foreign military, now largely withdrawn from combat operations, was able to win battles but did not win the war. The current situation can be considered a stalemate. Peace negotiations – likely to be prolonged – are taking place in Doha in 2020. However, their likely outcome remains unclear. The negotiations could lead to religious conservatives administering some provinces and participating in government. The Taliban may be unsupportive of parts of the APF, particularly its approach to democratic legitimisation of government, human rights and gender equality.

Added to this, the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to require additional public finance to expand medical services, provide social protection and compensate for lost government revenues; the World Bank expects Afghanistan's economy to contract by between 5.5% and 7.4% in 2020 (World Bank, 2020). Given the security stalemate and uncertainty surrounding the peace negotiations, Afghanistan needs an APF that is relevant to the challenges currently facing the country – and one that empowers, rather than disempowers, the elements of Afghan society that partners wish to support.

The likely purpose of the APF

The overarching objective of the APF is unstated, but we can see at least four possibilities:

1. An agreement that enables Afghanistan's partners to lock-in a particular governance, human rights and development paradigm
2. An agreement that partner governments can show to their parliaments and constituents to demonstrate that Afghanistan's development commitments are consonant with their own values and deserving of financial, technical and security support.
3. An agreement that articulates the aspirations of a substantial segment of Afghan society, that will improve Afghan state performance, and that empowers the Afghan government's negotiating position at the peace talks.
4. An agreement that the Afghanistan government, seeking clear partner commitments, can use to secure resources to strengthen the state among its constituencies, consistent with New Deal mutual accountability.¹

The preamble to the APF suggests that partner interests (1) and (2) predominate. Most of the criticisms of the draft, which we express below, stem from the challenges of reconciling these value-driven objectives with the more pragmatic goal to improve Afghan government performances, captured in (3) and (4) above. In the concluding section of this brief, we suggest that, in addition to the individual improvements we outline in the following subsections, a more overarching improvement would be to articulate these objectives in two separate documents: one being a broad aspirational piece that speaks to the Taliban on key normative issues; the other being a more operational piece aimed at the current government, with a view to achieving progress on areas such as corruption and program delivery.

The following sections discuss what we believe should be the key priorities for strengthening the APF: ensuring Afghan ownership; taking a more realistic approach to conditionality; improving mutual accountability; ensuring greater strategic coherence; setting clearer priorities; and introducing clearer impact measurement.

¹ The New Deal for Effective Engagement in Fragile States was agreed between the g7+ group of fragile states and their bilateral and multilateral partners in Busan, Republic of Korea in 2011. www.newdeal4peace.org.

Assessing the APF

Ensuring Afghan ownership

Ownership matters, and the process for agreeing the APF may determine the breadth and depth of Afghan stakeholder support. The APF will struggle to succeed without parliamentary and civil society support, and risks repeating the past error of rushed agreements negotiated with only a few government counterparts on the eve of a donor conference. After 19 years of development partner engagement in Afghanistan and three previous compacts, there ought to be scope for mutual learning, innovation and adaptation. Despite this, the draft APF appears to have been written by partners with even less Afghan consultation or input than previous compacts.

The draft recommends a rapid transition to a Western model of liberal democracy, which is unrealistic under current conditions in Afghanistan. Donors need to find ways of establishing clear benchmarks while avoiding conditioning all development assistance on the achievement, or maintenance, of unrealistic standards. There is evidence on good practice, with respect to ownership and co-design for compacts, including from other countries, that Afghanistan and its partners could draw from (see Annex A).

Taking a realistic approach to conditionality

Related to ownership is the conditionality-driven approach of the APF, in the form of one-sided commitments imposed on the Afghanistan government in return for promises of aid. The long history of aid shows that donor-driven conditionality does not work, but that mutual accountability around country-specific commitments with ownership can.²

More generally, aid can support reform but it cannot buy sustained change. Pressing too hard risks a cynical response from a government that will feel it has no choice but to agree to these conditions at this time. Furthermore, several of the

draft APF commitments are outside the Afghanistan government's immediate control – for example, civilian casualties, perceptions of personal safety, gender equality and poverty incidence – and so it cannot be held solely accountable for them. There may be greater mileage to be gained by focusing conditionality on performance in areas more directly under the government's control: in particular, key government functions and priority programs.

Improving mutual accountability

A partnership agreement requires commitments from all parties, not only the host government. But what is conspicuously missing from the draft APF is any clear donor accountability. International partners have made such commitments at the global level – signing up to, for example, the New Deal on Effective Engagement in Fragile States – and these need to be translated into the APF. Development partner commitments must be measurable and may specify annual financial disbursements; percentage of disbursements made through government budget systems; the scale of impact in relation to the size of the problem being addressed; and timely independent evaluation of government and bilateral programmes.

Greater strategic coherence

The APF appears to support development partners' vision for Afghanistan. However, given the experience of previous compacts, the question is whether this vision is shared across and within partner governments (e.g. with diplomatic and security policy communities), much less with the Afghanistan government and civil society. Even if all extended parties are agreed upon the APF's overarching objectives, the draft agreement offers little in the way of a feasible coherent strategy for achieving them. As we elaborate on below, the

² See, e.g., World Bank (2005); and, on Afghanistan specifically, Byrd (2012). World Bank-supported development policy lending now links to prior actions taken by the government according to its timetable before the loan is approved.

selection of programmes and indicators supported by the APF are not well linked to overarching objectives or to a clear strategy or theory of change that connects the engagement of different policy communities in mutually supporting ways. This may be symptomatic of the transactional approach to development that has failed to address the grievances that have driven the conflict since 2001. A lack of coherence among political, security, justice and development engagements has characterised much past international engagement in Afghanistan (see Annex B).

This lack of strategic coherence is perhaps of most concern in the statebuilding element, in which the proposed APF actions are drawn in their entirety from the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan recent review of the Afghanistan government's progress against their anticorruption commitments (UNAMA 2020). The actions listed represent primarily partner concerns about the high-level and visible corruption that endangers their commitments and investments – specifically over the Anti-Corruption Justice Centre (ACJC), high-level prosecutions and administrative reform. This emphasis on high-level corruption ignores the general concerns of the public that relate to day-to-day corruption in service delivery such as health, education, the police, or land usurpation, all of which do much to give the Taliban credibility with their anticorruption platform.

Clearer priority-setting

Without clear objectives and a feasible strategy for achieving them it is difficult to set priorities for the APF. Continuing insecurity, the uncertain outcome of the peace negotiations, the global pandemic and an emerging fiscal crisis do not provide a setting in which to take risky political decisions. Instead immediate goals might be to address some of the grievances that drive the conflict in Afghanistan, to concentrate resources on development areas with political traction and popular support that are likely to have transformational impact at scale, and to complete programmes with sunk investments that are still capable of substantial results.

The APF is based on the Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF), which has, like earlier development plans, struggled to prioritize among competing pressures within government and among development partners. The

APF supports incremental steps, which are often all that are politically and practically feasible in fragile settings. But incremental changes may be insufficient to address Afghanistan's overarching ambitions of self-reliance, economic growth, and peace set out in the ANPDF. As noted above, agreeing goals that are critical for these ambitions and the priority actions to achieve them, requires a real dialogue between international partners, government, and other Afghan stakeholders. Conducting such a dialogue should not delay the urgent need for funding a Covid response and for maintaining the momentum of successful programmes, but rushing the APF to meet a conference deadline is unlikely to create the focused support necessary to secure peace. Adjusting the aims of the conference to agree a multiyear resource envelope and expenditure for the first year, while allowing time to complete a development cooperation framework with buy-in from Afghanistan and its partners, would be one way forward.

Clearer impact measurement

The challenge in any mutual accountability framework is to make clear the links between the proposed actions, outcomes, and measurements of achievement or impact. The metrics used in Afghanistan's previous mutual accountability frameworks have often proved to be the most contentious element part of negotiations. This is because they are at the core of the partner conditionality debate and the basis of judgement on performance by both government and partners.

The APF, like other compacts, has struggled to limit the number of indicators and to concentrate them on measuring those factors critical to Afghanistan's transition to resilience. Choosing the right indicators matters, because what gets measured tends to get done and as Natsios (2010) has written, 'those development programs that are most precisely and easily measured are the least transformational, and those programs that are most transformational are the least measurable'.

The Geneva Mutual Accountability Framework (GMAF) that is now being concluded measured progress towards 63 deliverables through a traffic-light system that identified gaps or delays in delivery. The current APF appears to have chosen a different route, with fewer actions (not necessarily identified as deliverables) and with metrics that are either

very high-level impact indicators or highly specific performance indicators. Transformation ultimately requires results at scale. Without clear strategic objectives and a testable theory of change, it is difficult to select indicators that measure whether development engagement on Afghanistan is on track. A collection of incremental interventions and indicators perpetuates tactics over strategy, an approach that has fallen short of the aspirations of Afghans and their partners.

This is most apparent in the agreement's peacebuilding section, which uses independent surveys or United Nations civilian casualty and gender data, and where it is difficult to establish the link or relationship to government or partner responsibilities and action. Similarly concerning is the statebuilding section, which comprises a mix of action indicators and a more general undefined impact indicator that would measure the 'reduced prevalence of corruption', likely using the Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index. As an expert-based perceptions survey, this impact indicator is may be limited, failing to weigh adequately the aspects of corruption and abuse of power that most concern Afghan citizens.³

Conclusion: a potential way forward

This brief has put forward criticisms of the draft APF and suggested ways in which specific areas could be improved. However, the individual shortcomings with the note arguably stem from a more general problem, which is that it appears to merge two sets of conflicting objectives. On the one hand, the document is a clear statement of donor preferences with respect to normative issues including democracy, human rights, and women's rights, in light of the potential for Taliban participation in government. On the other hand, the document is also intended to contribute to improved government performance. As it stands, the effort to reconcile these two objectives is subject to a range of problems, as we have outlined above. In the absence of the potential for a more fundamental re-think of the document, and in light of the encroaching deadline for the Geneva conference, donors might consider articulating these objectives in separate documents. One would be a broad aspirational piece that speaks to the Taliban on key normative issues; the other would be an operational piece aimed at the current government, with a view to achieving progress on areas such as corruption and program delivery.

³ See, e.g., Economist (2020). In our view, a more holistic approach to anti-corruption would include institution building (including at subnational levels of government), establishing the necessary legal framework, administrative reform, policing and detention, and judicial reform.

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Annex A Lessons from other compacts

Taken from Manuel, M., McKechnie, A., Wilson, G. and das Pradhan-Blach, R. (2017) The New Deal in Somalia: an independent review of the Somali Compact, 2014–2016. ODI Report. London: Overseas Development Institute, p. 10.

1. Context matters. A peace agreement or stable political settlement and basic security should be in place or in the process of being established.
2. Country ownership and participation in designing the compact are key, including that of local regional actors and civil society. Compacts should be endogenous processes that lead to strengthening bonds between state and society. Ownership implies that constraints imposed by political and public appetite for reforms are considered.
3. Level of national, sub-national and international capacities to manage and implement should be factored into compact design.
4. Compacts need to be understood and supported by the leadership, the legislature and other key stakeholders. Without such support, implementation of a compact will be difficult, particularly when the country context changes.
5. Prioritisation and focus should balance vision and achievability. Compacts were effective when based on a narrow set of agreed priorities, a focused agenda for reform and short timelines.
6. Compact commitments and benchmarks should be specific, concrete, monitorable and balanced. There should be provision for their implementation, oversight, performance monitoring and enforcement. Compacts should reinforce, not add to, conditionalities of multilateral organisations.
7. Mutual accountability needs to be two-sided. Compact obligations have mainly fallen on the government, with little concrete commitment or accountability taken on by donors e.g. on delivering financing.
8. Specific actions and support to strengthen government institutional effectiveness should be included, with effort focused on synchronising compact priority areas with the approved plans of government.
9. Coordination arrangements have been bureaucratic, understaffed and often added little value. Compacts generally improve coordination, but this can come with high transaction costs. Coordination works best when government is in the lead, has been provided with capacity to do so, and there are sufficient funds available to support necessary consultation.

Annex B Tactics without strategy

The Washington Post acquired 2,000 pages of interviews of key players in the Afghanistan war conducted by the United States Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) and used these to prepare a series of articles. ‘Stranded without a strategy’ (9 December 2019) contains the following quotations:

We were trying to get a single coherent long-term approach — a proper strategy — but instead we got a lot of tactics... There was no coherent long-term strategy.

—General Sir David Richards, ISAF Commander, speaking to government interviewers

If I were to write a book, its [cover] would be: ‘America goes to war without knowing why it does’... We went in reflexively after 9/11 without knowing what we were trying to achieve. I would like to write a book about having a plan and an endgame before you go in.

—Unnamed senior US State Department official

I tried to get someone to define for me what winning meant, even before I went over, and nobody could. Nobody would give me a good definition of what it meant. ... There was no NATO campaign plan — a lot of verbiage and talk, but no plan. ... So for better or for worse, a lot of what we did, we did with some forethought, but most of it was reacting to conditions on the ground... We were opportunists.

—Lt. Gen. Dan McNeill, ISAF Commander, speaking to government interviewers

Source: *Washington Post* (2019) ‘Stranded without a strategy’. *Washington Post*, 9 December (www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-strategy)

The dominance of tactics over strategy was translated into similar thinking on development. As Tim Graczewski, economic development officer for the Southern command, stated:

There was no real articulated bottom-up or top-down strategy... There was no master plan. Each time a group came in, they would say this is what we are going to do. Everyone had their own sandbox. Every country had their own pet project and lanes of effort.

There was no guiding strategy that could lead to a coherent, whole-of-government engagement in Afghanistan. Lt Gen Douglas Lute, former US National Security Council director for Afghanistan said during an interview with SIGAR:

Strategy is the initial alignment of what you want to achieve- goals, or ends. The NSC is good at this part of policy; there is a healthy paragraph outlining goals in Afghanistan.... But below this, the trilogy or chain tends to get weaker. As for ways, there is only a casual appreciation of how to deal with this part of the equation. There is an overemphasis on the military—an over-appreciation of the military and an under-appreciation of policy, diplomacy and development. These are all considered secondary to the primacy of military ways. This begins to fracture or erode strategy. We came to this realization late.

The interview report with Amb. Richard Boucher concludes with six lessons:

1. Lower your expectations
2. Define your goals
3. Don't forget why you went there
4. Mission creep is inherent in our system
5. We have to say good enough is good enough. That is why we are there 15 years later. We are trying to achieve the unachievable instead of achieving the achievable
6. If governance is your exit strategy, as it almost always is when we go into these places, we have to get a lot better at building governance. Not great, not systematic, not accountable, just decent governance.

Source: Interview reports available on the Washington Post website: www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/documents-database



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