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The Afghan National Development Strategy: The Right Plan at the Wrong Time?

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Abstract

In 2005, the Government of Afghanistan initiated a process leading to the formulation of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS). The ANDS was formally launched at the International Conference in Support of Afghanistan in Paris on June 12, 2008. According to the Paris Conference Declaration, the strategy will be the “roadmap for joint action [by donors and the Afghan government] over the next five years and sets our shared priorities.”¹

This paper examines whether the ANDS, in fact, is strategic. It begins with a brief analysis of what a strategy is before providing an overview of the goals and structure of the ANDS. It then turns to an analysis of its substance, particularly the nexus of security and development. It argues that, while the ANDS does articulate a vision with high-level goals and clear enabling objectives, it does so on the basis of fundamentally flawed assumptions about the nature of Afghanistan’s political, economic, and social realities – including the capacity of the Afghan state for implementation – thereby jeopardising the very vision it sets out to attain.

¹ Declaration of the International Conference in Support of Afghanistan, June 12, 2008, via <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/IMG/pdf/english.pdf>, accessed December 22, 2008.

I. The Afghanistan National Development Strategy

A strategy is a plan of action for successfully achieving an overall goal or set of goals. Applied to the context of national development, a strategy should be based on a realistic assessment of the country environment, including risks and opportunities; overall needs and priorities, and available resources and capacities (strengths and weaknesses) to pursue the overall goal. It should outline a structure for delivery and provide a rationale as to how individual “sectoral” programs (e.g., education, energy, social protection) are integrated to achieve the overarching goal. Finally, the plan should not be static, but rather a dynamic process through which all these elements can be assessed and adapted to changing realities.²

Three decades of continuous armed conflict have devastated Afghanistan. The internationally-led effort to stabilise and reconstruct the country since 2001 has made strides in improving health and education, it has ushered in democratic institutions of governance, and, in many areas, has provided a modicum of security. But it struggled to bring rule of law and economic well-being to the country as a whole.

The ANDS identifies a long-term vision that, by 2020, Afghanistan will be:

- *“A stable Islamic constitutional democracy at peace with itself and its neighbors, standing with full dignity in the international family.*
- *A tolerant, united, and pluralistic nation that honours its Islamic heritage and the deep seated aspirations toward participation, justice, and equal rights for all.*
- *A society of hope and prosperity based on a strong, private-sector led market economy, social equity, and environmental sustainability.”³*

Towards these ends, the ANDS sets out three high-level goals in the areas of security, governance, and development,⁴ as well as a cross-cutting goal

² Rahul Chandran, "Peacekeeping, Statebuilding and Strategic Planning," Paper presented at the annual meeting of the ISA's 49th Annual Convention, Bridging Multiple Divides, San Francisco, CA, March 26, 2008.

³ Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, *Afghanistan National Development Strategy*, p. i., via http://www.ands.gov.af/ands/final_ands/src/final/Afghanistan%20National%20Development%20Strategy_eng.pdf, accessed on July 12, 2008. Hereafter “ANDS.”

⁴ These goals are, “Security: Achieve nationwide stabilization, strengthen law enforcement, and improve personal security for every Afghan. 2. Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights: Strengthen democratic processes and institutions, human rights, the rule of law, delivery of public services and government accountability. 3. Economic and Social Development: Reduce poverty, ensure sustainable development through a private-sector-led market economy, improve human development indicators, and make significant progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).”

related to the elimination of illegal narcotics. The former three areas comprise the pillars of the ANDS. Although ANDS has a five-year time frame, it rationalizes the achievement of these goals with the longer-term achievement of its vision for 2020.

Viewed narrowly, the ANDS appears to provide a sound strategic framework for the realisation of Afghanistan's security, development, and governance goals. (The subheading of the ANDS identifies it as "a strategy for security, governance, economic growth, and poverty reduction.") The Afghan government has adopted an integrated or "joined-up approach," whereby the overarching vision and goals inform interlinked, objective-based sector strategies. These, in turn, inform programmes and projects that cut across Ministries and other government entities (i.e., the strategy for agriculture and rural development is not the sum total of Ministry of Agriculture's programmes, but focuses on supporting livelihoods for the poorest Afghans, as well as security dimensions via alternative livelihoods for poppy cultivation.)

In addition to developing sector strategies on the basis of line-Ministry inputs against high-level goals, the ANDS incorporates priorities gleaned from local consultations. Despite insecurity across much of the country's 34 provinces, provincial meetings were held with some 17,000 individuals, enabling identification of local priorities and the formulation of different provincial development plans.⁵

But while the ANDS provides a strategically sound framework on paper, it is predicated on the existence of an Afghan state that is both capable – and, importantly, willing – to implement it. Thus, while the *vision* of Afghanistan's future is sound, the means of realizing it are deeply flawed. Nor is the Afghan government alone to blame; the ANDS further assumes that donors not only agree on the stated strategic goals (which they largely do), but also on how to achieve them (which they do not).

II. Contradictions in the Security-Development Nexus

According to consultations conducted by the ANDS secretariat in each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces, security is the highest priority in two-thirds of provincial development plans, particularly in the south and east. Here, "security is perceived as the fundamental basis on which all other development depends."⁶ This is consistent with findings of the 2008 survey by The Asia Foundation, which found that 36 percent of respondents identified security as the greatest problem facing

⁵ Given the inability of the Government to access large areas of territory, particularly in the south and east of the country, the priorities of communities in these areas are not reflected in provincial development plans (PDPs).

⁶ ANDS, p. 22.

Afghanistan; those in the southwest and southeast also reported “a consistent degradation of security conditions since 2006.”⁷

As a country struggling both to establish peace after decades of conflict, and to deliver vital services to its citizens (and thereby secure legitimacy), Afghanistan, in the ANDS, has explicitly linked “traditional” development activities for poverty alleviation and economic growth – building roads and other vital infrastructure, delivering social services, encouraging enterprise development – with more pressing security and governance objectives like combating corruption and illegal narcotics, as well as fighting insurgency and crime. In this respect, Afghanistan has been able to build upon the experience of the poverty reduction strategy process⁸ in Sierra Leone, which first integrated security as a central component in recognition of its importance to long term development goals. As in Sierra Leone, economic opportunity lies at the nexus of security and development; the inability to provide gainful employment for youth is directly linked to recruitment for the insurgency, to banditry, and to other forms of violence. Thirty-one percent of those responding to the Asia Foundation survey identified economic issues, including employment, as the biggest problem facing the country; second only to insecurity in percent of responses.⁹ Unlike Sierra Leone, however, Afghanistan is not just facing the challenge of consolidating peace, but also of ending ongoing – and arguably worsening – violence across much of the country.

Recognising the relationship between shorter-term stabilisation goals and longer-term development goals, the implementation plan for the ANDS sequences priorities according to three phases: stabilisation (focused on rule of law and governance); consolidation (focused on basic service delivery); and transformation (focused on economic growth and human security). Each is intended to provide the foundation for the next.¹⁰ But growing insecurity threatens not only implementation of the first and subsequent phases of the ANDS, but also, across large swaths of territory, the very viability of the Afghan state itself and, with it, the unstated objectives of the Afghan government’s international partners.

⁷ The Asia Foundation, Afghanistan in 2008: A Survey of the Afghan People. Key Findings,”

<http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/AG2008KeyFindings.pdf>, accessed January 7, 2009.

⁸ A Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) is a national strategy for development and poverty-reduction. Initiated by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the PRS process is undertaken jointly by the government with the donor community and domestic stakeholders – including, to varying levels, civil society – as a condition for debt relief. The ANDS serves as Afghanistan’s PRSP.

⁹ The Asia Foundation, Afghanistan in 2008: A Survey of the Afghan People. Key Findings,”

<http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/AG2008KeyFindings.pdf>, accessed January 7, 2009.

¹⁰ ANDS, p. 167. The strategy is noticeably ambiguous in identifying whether the time frame in which this transition will occur is within the five-year plan of the ANDS, as well in identifying the sub-priorities within the broad priority areas of each phase.

Afghanistan and its partners face difficulty in reconciling and prioritising security sector reform goals. On one hand, long-term reforms are meant to yield sustainable improvements in the delivery of security and justice (enhancing professionalism, strengthening oversight, eliminating corruption) that will contribute to the rule of law and enable market activities necessary for (licit) economic growth. On the other hand, short-term activities are meant to yield immediate, measurable improvement on the ground (i.e., counter-insurgency), penetration of state authority, and the delivery of reconstruction and development, thereby strengthening government legitimacy. As a result, no common strategy for the security sector has emerged in practice.

In fact, short and long term objectives have often proven contradictory in implementation. Competing strategic objectives of improving governance and providing territorial security have created confusion in the reform of the Afghanistan National Police (ANP) over whether their primary objective should be law and order functions, or counter-insurgency. These objectives are not inherently contradictory – poor governance creates popular resentment from which the government suffers and insurgents benefit – but they do require different skill sets, tactics, and equipment. National police training has focused on the hard security aspects of policing – serving as backfill for international and national military operations to clear areas, countering terrorism, and fighting organised crime – tasks to which they are ill-suited and under-equipped. Importantly, the focus on the security dimensions of counter-insurgency has come at the expense of the governance aspects of policing – i.e., the role of the police in supporting an effective justice system.¹¹

This has several dimensions. First, the police are not being adequately positioned to play a role in the justice system. The few weeks training for rank and file officers, many of who are illiterate, is designed to get as many police on the ground in as short a time as possible – not to develop a well-trained, highly skilled, professional police force capable of preventing and investigating crimes, and doing so in a manner that upholds citizens rights.

Second, efforts to reform the Ministry of Interior, local police forces, and the state justice system have largely failed to tackle corruption, further undermining people's confidence – and willingness to use – the state system. The appointment of Hanif Atmar as Minister of Interior in October 2008 is an encouraging sign that reforming the MoI is finally being taken seriously. But Atmar – entrusted with the reform of his third ministry since 2001 – also underscores the limited number of reform-minded senior Afghan officials upon whom implementation of ANDS depends. Ministerial capacity has improved since 2002, particularly in key areas of health, education, and finance. But the government as a whole remains riven by factionalism, incapacity, and, increasingly, corruption. Such deficits make difficult undertaking the reforms necessary to successfully implement the ANDS; not least because many

¹¹ Former Minister of Interior Ali Jalali recently called for the establishment of “distinct counter-insurgency and civilian policing units within the ANP,” A. Jalali, “The Future of Security Institutions,” in J. Alex Thier, ed., *The Future of Afghanistan*, (Washington, DC: USIP, 2009), p. 32.

within government – or beholden to those outside of it – are opposed to reforms that will undermine their power and interests. To paraphrase Robert Komer’s conclusion from US experience in Vietnam, policymakers must account for the ability of multilateral, bilateral, and national institutions carrying out the policy to actually execute it as intended.¹²

Third, the focus of the justice reform strategy in the ANDS is on the formal, state justice system, which handles less than 20 percent of cases.¹³ The majority of cases are handled by the non-state system of local jirgas and shuras, which arbitrate and decide cases on the basis of local understandings of Islamic law, *Pashtunwali*, or other cultural norms. These codes are locally understood and, usually, accepted, even though in many cases they violate international human rights, particularly of women and children. Customary fora are also often linked to local power holders, who are able to manipulate rulings in order to capture local resources and marginalise less powerful groups. Importantly, however, the decisions are predictable – consistency that the corrupt, inaccessible, or incomprehensible formal justice system does not have.

Contradictory security policies also reflect the fact that, while the ANDS is meant to be locally owned, development of Afghanistan’s security institutions relies heavily on international financing and leadership. Under the lead of the United States, the majority of support to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) occurs outside of the national budget process. Security policy, similarly, is far from a nationally-led process for realising the goals of the ANDS, but instead a foreign-led process driven more by the foreign policy and national security goals of the “international community” – the elimination of international terrorists and illegal narcotics, enabling the withdrawal of international forces – than to the stated needs of Afghan citizens.¹⁴

Security strategy is being driven reactively from the ground up according to the perceived short-term demands of counter-insurgency, “its pace and direction dictated by the fluid political and security situation”¹⁵ – or, more precisely, international actors’ perceptions thereof. While more forward-looking approaches have been sidelined, those focused on short-term solutions have caused a deterioration of Afghans’ livelihoods, particularly among those whose decision to participate in and support the state is most essential to its survival – predominantly the rural poor in the border provinces. This population has had minimal contact with the state and, when it has, the interaction has often been marked by official corruption or state-perpetrated violence.

The ANDS repeatedly asserts that security is an enabler for development,

¹² R. W. Komer, “Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam,” A report prepared for the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, (Rand Corporation, 1972), p. xii.

¹³ Center for Policy and Human Development, “2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report: Bridging Modernity and Tradition – the Rule of Law and the Search for Justice,” (Islamabad: Army Press, 2007), p. 91.

¹⁴ This point is also made in E. van Veen, *Journal of Security Sector Management*, July 2008, p. 4.

¹⁵ Mark Sedra, “Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan: The Slide Towards Expediency,” *International Peacekeeping*, Vol. 13, No. 1, March 2006, p. 107.

economic growth, and poverty alleviation.¹⁶ The National Security Policy is the framework on which the ANDS security pillar is based¹⁷ and by which Afghanistan and its international partners will delivery security. “Security,” however, is never defined by the ANDS, although it is to be “improved for every Afghan.” According to Rubin, “debates over security often neglect to define whose security is at stake and for what purpose...The claim that any specific use of force creates ‘security’ is a political claim that the force is legitimate and that those against whom it is directed are outlaws or spoilers.”¹⁸ (In the case of Afghanistan, one might arguably add “terrorists” to this list, as the label has become a convenient way for powerholders to eliminate rivals with unwitting Coalition assistance.)

The ANDS further states, “A strong National Security Structure will facilitate development of Afghanistan’s economy, social fabric and *thus will enhance national unity and peaceful coexistence* [sic].”¹⁹ Nonetheless, the means by which “security” is to “enhance national unity and peaceful coexistence” is not made clear. The ANDS’s strategic vision for the security sector – “to ensure security of state, persons, and assets through the provision of a costed, integrated, and sustainable national security infrastructure and law and order policy”²⁰ – appears to be based primarily on the military defeat of all “terrorists” and other illegal armed elements. As internal security challenges are overcome through use of force (with external military assistance), this logic argues, the government will extend its authority and, with it, bring rule of law and an environment conducive to private and public investment. It is unclear how this military action will “enhance national unity and peaceful coexistence,” particularly for those communities that already feel that their interests are not represented by the Afghan state.

The basis of the current political dispensation in Afghanistan – the Bonn Agreement – was not a peace agreement, nor did it provide a foundation for national reconciliation. A considerable portion of the population supportive of the Taliban regime (or at least the order it instilled) were therefore unrepresented and now exist in opposition to the state (which has failed to bring similar order, let alone rule of law). Furthermore, while the political process was viewed by the international community as a means of conferring legitimacy on the post-Taliban government, many Afghan groups regard the political process as a way of advancing their own visions of the future of the state.²¹ What the Afghan government faces is, thus, not just a crisis of insecurity, but a crisis of illegitimacy.

¹⁶ ANDS, p. 5.

¹⁷ The National Security Policy is based on the National Security Strategy and the Security Sector Reforms Strategy. The ANDS outlines the latter, but not the former.

¹⁸ B. Rubin, “The Politics of Security in Post-Conflict Statebuilding,” in C. Call and V. Wyeth, “Building States to Build Peace,” (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner: 2008), p. 31.

¹⁹ ANDS, p. 53, emphasis added.

²⁰ ANDS, p. 53.

²¹ J. Sherman, “Afghanistan: Nationally-led Statebuilding,” in C. Call and V. Wyeth, *op. cit.*, p. 308.

III. Securing the Future

This is not to argue for greater emphasis on security over development within the ANDS, nor for “more effective” short-term security at the expense of longer-term reform. Rather, it is to make that case that short-term security fixes have been thrown at Afghanistan’s growing insecurity without due consideration for the root causes of the country’s conflict and the long-term strategy needed to redress them. In doing so, many of these “solutions” have actually exacerbated insecurity, both directly through deployment of predatory and unruly police forces and indirectly by reinforcing the view that the Afghan state – and the international forces that sustain it – are illegitimate.

If the ANDS is, in fact, to lay out an integrated strategy for attaining its vision of Afghanistan in 2020, then the focus must be on how both security and development can further the goals of redressing root causes of conflict and building sustainable peace, stability, and recovery. (Re)establishing the social contract between the state and society should shape the statebuilding agenda. Thus, ANDS requires not just pro-poor, but pro-peace economic growth and poverty alleviation: Afghanistan is not only a poor country in which better governance and greater rule of law would encourage (licit) economic activity, but one still on the brink of collapse from conflict, corruption, and poor governance.

The ANDS recognises that, “Without good governance *and a sustained social contract for the acceptance of the rule of law*, the total development strategy that has been developed in the ANDS will fail.”²² A “social contract” is based on the principle that, unless the state is willing and able to impose itself absolutely on society, then citizens accept its exercise of authority in exchange for goods and services, of which security is one. The legitimacy of the state, in large measure, is based upon this *quid pro quo*.

Historically, the Afghan government has maintained only a tenuous hold over the peripheral territories of the country; the state was mostly absent and its absence was mostly welcomed. In its place, local, traditional, non-state institutions provide the basis for social order and social protection. These often competing institutions exist across Afghanistan but are perhaps strongest in the southern and eastern provinces; areas that, excepting provincial capitals, are today largely beyond the control of the central government and thus under the *de facto* control of Taliban or other armed groups opposed to the state. The majority of the population in these regions was initially open to the new government and the prospect of entitlements that participation in the state would mean – security, access to justice, other services.

Today, however, it has grown increasingly sceptical that the Government can deliver these services more effectively than the armed groups (since these groups are both providers of security and insecurity – i.e., the government cannot protect the population from Taliban, but the Taliban

²² ANDS, p. 69, emphasis added.

can dole out retribution to communities in these areas that claim allegiance to the state.) As van Veen states, “whereas the state might have a strong agenda for centralising the provision of security, citizens may be better off when the state enables decentralised solutions.”²³ Many Afghans, too, state they want a strong central authority – but their trust in its present incarnation is dwindling and many now prefer to keep the state at arms length, whether or not it promises security and development.

IV. Conclusion

Thus far, the Afghan government and its international partners have not demonstrated that they can “win” the counter-insurgency; terrorist attacks are increasing in number and geographic reach, while deaths of civilians and both Afghan and foreign troops are climbing.²⁴ The foreign-led “strategy” does not appear to be working, nor, importantly, does it appear to be joined up – despite the claim – to political goals embedded in the vision of Afghanistan as “*A tolerant, united, and pluralistic nation that honours its Islamic heritage and the deep seated aspirations toward participation, justice, and equal rights for all.*”

If the Taliban cannot be defeated militarily – as appears increasingly to be the case – then the government and its partners must consider alternatives in its security strategy. A security strategy absent integrated, appropriate political and economic efforts to end the conflict will fail. What is missing from the ANDS is not just a clear articulation of what the security strategy is, but of how short-term and long-term efforts underway will arrive at that destination. As a starting point, it needs a strategy to realise the long-term vision for the country for *all* Afghans, as intended by the Constitution, not just those in the political favor of the international community. Indeed, absent an integrated strategy that increases the security and legitimacy of the government for all, the ANDS is likely to prove the strategy for development that never came to pass.

²³ E. van Veen, *Journal of Security Sector Management*, op. cit., p. 4.

²⁴ See the US State Department’s Country Reports on Terrorism 2007, <http://www.state.gov/s/ct/rls/crt/2007/103709.htm>, for evidence of the first; the suicide bomb attacks in Kabul on the Serena Hotel in 2007 and the Indian Embassy in 2008 are evidence of the second; and iCasualties.org <http://icasualties.org/oef/>, which tracks Coalition military fatalities by year, for evidence of the third.