



# The future: A responsible role for the international community

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**The** imminent removal of the Taliban regime raises the issue of what Afghanistan's government will look like after the military actions.

Not only will Afghanistan's physical infrastructure need to be rebuilt, but also its structures and mechanisms of government. Given the governance void and the level of social and political dislocation, this rebuilding must go beyond simply putting a government in place, and extend to helping create an entire political system that reflects both the values and practices of democracy and good governance.

The international community must become involved in the initial stages—and stay involved until a system of governance that responds to the needs of Afghans is firmly implanted. This means elections—and probably more than one series of them.

After a period in which “nation-building” in far away places had, too often, come to be regarded as irrelevant to national interests, governments have now promised that the current intervention in Afghanistan will not repeat the errors of past campaigns. Most recently, Britain's Foreign Secretary Jack Straw outlined the commitment of the international community regarding the future governance of Afghanistan by stating four principles:

First, that the future of Afghanistan must be placed in the hands of the people of Afghanistan; second, that we need a global coalition to help rebuild Afghanistan; third, that the United Nations take the lead in the political process; and fourth, that the requisite resources and political will are there to finish the job.

While it might be possible to quibble over the details, the first and fourth of these principles seem beyond question and the second and third of them are

very sound policy. If the cycle of military intervention and civil war is to be broken, now is the time to explore the options for international assistance in reconstructing effective and representative government in Afghanistan. The global coalition must be created and begin its practical work immediately.

Given the number of actors that hold a stake in the future government of Afghanistan, it is clear that an effective dialogue among, and not merely acknowledgement of, these actors is needed to explore and decide on a course of action. It is in this capacity—by bringing these actors together and assisting them in their negotiation—that the international community will play a valuable role. If a decentralized or federal structure is a viable option in this process, and several have argued that it is, then federal countries should provide leadership in facilitating that dialogue.

This being said, it remains to be seen what specifically the international community can offer in the area of governance assistance. That is, what are the options for an effective governance assistance programme in Afghanistan? Whatever strategy is chosen it must have the dual purpose of supporting the necessary political dialogue and of offering technical assistance in the implementation of decisions that arise from the dialogue.

## **Learning from past efforts**

Solutions on a larger scale could involve a direct UN interim government, such as the UN Transitional Administration of Cambodia (UNTAC) following the 1991 Paris Treaty.

The intuitive appeal of this approach is that a relatively large international presence would counteract the inevitable power vacuum that would come in the

wake of the military campaign. The process would likely involve the progression from military to non-military intervention, potentially with the use of a peacekeeping force. This would require an extremely high level of international commitment.

Another appealing aspect of the UNTAC model is that while it buys time for decisions to be taken and procedures to be developed, it avoids putting the government of Afghanistan in the hands of an interested party or group which might find it in its immediate interests to avoid further political evolution. Under this latter scenario, in a few years' time the international community is likely to find itself faced once again with a fractured country and a government that supports international terrorism while terrorizing its own population.

The clearly agreed-upon interim nature of a regime built on the UNTAC model would also provide urgency and targets for the nation-building process that could help avoid the sense of a completely open-ended process that has in the past so badly discredited “nation building” as an international activity. Having said this, even once it turns over power to an Afghan administration, the international community along with the interim administration and its support mechanisms will need to remain engaged in Afghanistan much longer than it did in Cambodia.

As an alternative to this kind of direct foreign administration, assistance could also involve a Dayton Accord-type of externally brokered negotiation process.

With the possible exception of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, the influence of foreign governments in Afghanistan, both militarily and otherwise, has mostly been by way of indirect support to the various actors in the country. While in the

past this was usually in the destructive form of covert military support, it is conceivable that external assistance could take the form of overseeing a negotiated arrangement among the various stakeholders in Afghanistan. This might lessen the need for a heavy foreign presence, while assisting in the negotiation of a peace treaty and a constitutional framework.

However, in a country as splintered as Afghanistan, a Dayton Accord-type process might be better envisaged as a means of ensuring that an interim period of government is brought to an end on schedule.

### **Local ownership, international support**

As noted at the outset, whatever form international involvement in Afghanistan takes, the underlying imperative will be to incorporate the element of sustainability into the arrangement. Sustainability in this case must imply local ownership, and not an indefinite foreign presence.

More than merely a sunset clause, this means that the content of the international assistance program itself must be designed to develop Afghanistan's capacity to govern itself, and not merely to shore up an interim regime.

But this can only emerge if the specific socio-political landscape is taken into account. The centralization/decentralization element is key to this. Rex Brynen, professor of political science at McGill University, points to the fact that government in Afghanistan has been fairly decentralized, most recently under the Taliban. While this is largely by virtue of the lack of sovereign control in many areas, it does contribute to the existing culture of government, such as it is.

There is no workable constitutional precedent in Afghanistan, but there are patterns of governance in place. If a constitutional process is to succeed, to sustain itself, it must recognize this fact.

It is clear enough that any new constitutional arrangement must achieve a relative balance of power, a *de jure* recognition of power sharing. But the process itself must also recognize the informal, or *de facto* decentralization

already present. In other words, the formal process must build upon the informal structures in place.

In this task, the international community is in a position to provide support through its programme of governance assistance. Before a constructive dialogue can be had among the concerned parties, a common frame of reference is needed, an outline of the different options. Past models of governance in Afghanistan are insufficient based as they are on warlords and undemocratic rule. The international community must help build this common frame of reference.

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One means of doing this, which takes into account the apparent need for a model that acknowledges the country's regional and ethnic diversity, could involve providing the parties with a detailed account of the various federal models, providing both a general background on federal structures—with the opportunities and challenges they bring—as well as relating these possible models to the Afghan context.

### **A role for “the federal world”**

Here is where federal countries have a comparative advantage in presenting various options for decentralized structures of government. Through a consultative process, practitioners and academics from various backgrounds in federal systems, focused on the task of relating federal experiences from their countries to the choices that Afghanistan will face, could provide a valuable tool for Afghan state builders. Albeit in a very different environment, a similar process

was used in the creation of the new South African constitution.

In doing this it is important to acknowledge that abstract models or even existing practical ones cannot be imported and grafted onto the Afghan state. The task would be to transform the experience of international practitioners into a meaningful resource for the state-building process in Afghanistan. This kind of assistance would form the basis for the first phase of an assistance strategy—to provide a detailed background on existing options for federal or decentralized government.

Only once Afghan practitioners have decided upon the outline of the basic structure of government would a second phase for international assistance be feasible. While those rebuilding the country will need their own sense of how an Afghan state will look, they will also require the technical skills of governing a country. Once again, those countries with a federal structure of government would have a valuable knowledge base about governing in a decentralized system.

The task of applying this knowledge to the Afghan context, however, would require a programme mandated to transfer this knowledge and transform it into practical assistance. The first phase of developing options would turn into more specific assistance on a technical level. Once again, this is an area in which practitioners and experts from around the world could play an important role. And again the assistance must be substantive, substantial, and enduring.

The most recent attention to Afghanistan has been described as the next chapter in the Great Game. The removal of the current government, while inevitable, must be the beginning rather than the end of this commitment.

It is clear that in the days after the military campaign immediate humanitarian concerns will be of the highest importance. Looking not too much further down the road, though, it would be in the interests of Afghans, as well as our own interests, to examine carefully the role the international community could play in building a system of effective, representative government in Afghanistan. (6)