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Jesse Paul Lehrke

The London Conference on Afghanistan – A New Strategy in Need of Further Specification

The 28 January 2010 London conference on Afghanistan aimed “to move the international effort forward in three key areas”: Security, Governance and Development, and Regional Support. The conference set out clear ambitions in each of these areas and announced several new policies to meet these ambitions. How the broad policies agreed at the conference can be transformed into executable programmes and identification of possible dangers for programme implementation are the next steps that must be taken.

While security, governance and development, and regional support in Afghanistan are intimately linked concepts, the London conference addressed them largely independent of each other and these three areas will be discussed here in the same organizational manner.

Security

The first ambition of the conference related to security was to “consider how the respective roles of the international and Afghan forces should evolve over time”. Under this objective, further troop contributions to the coalition forces were promised as part of a ‘surge’ strategy. Simultaneously, the Afghan Army will be increased from 104,000 to 171,000 and the Afghan Police from 96,800 to 134,000, enabling Afghan forces to take over security responsibilities province-by-province basis. To ensure the quality of these forces another aim of the conference was to “encourage Allies to increase their commitments in critical areas such as army and police training”.

While some new contributions were forthcoming, given the proposed size of the Afghan forces, their low combat capability, and high personnel turnover, further contributions are being sought. When all the above is combined with the lack of an Afghan National Security Strategy and Policy, the task of creating an integrated national security force operating under an appropriate unified doctrine is greatly complicated.

The final ambition under the security heading was to “address how to support Afghan-led efforts to

reintegrate former insurgents”. This ambition led to the most controversial outcome of the conference: “financial support for a Peace and Reintegration Trust Fund, to offer economic alternatives to those who renounce violence, cut links to terrorism and agree to work within the democratic process”. The lack of details about programme design has raised numerous concerns. It is unclear whether payment(s) will be given directly to combatants who sign up for the programme or whether the incentives will be distributed as assets at a group level through development projects. Economically and ethically the latter option is preferred by most parties but realistically concerns have been raised about whether groups would be willing to sign up for such a programme and also whether it could lead to inter-group conflict over the ‘peace dividend’. Additionally, it is not yet clear how the plan will move from demobilization of combatants to disarmament, which is difficult given the security situation, and subsequently to re-integration, difficult given the economic situation.

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Governance and Development

One stated ambition of the conference regarding governance and development was to “consider how its [the international community’s] development assistance supports Afghan leadership”. This statement indicates that development projects will be financed primarily based on how they contribute to supporting the government in Kabul. This is not to imply that the projects will not also have positive economic and social impacts but that the primary return on investment will be political. In support of

this goal the proportion of development aid delivered through Kabul is to rise to 50% (from 20%) in the next two years. This is intended to strengthen the government by giving them more ‘carrots’ to offer individuals and groups in exchange for support and loyalty. It should also increase the desire for participation (direct and indirect) in the central government due to its increased authority over dispersal of funds. On the negative side, such state-led development is often notoriously inefficient and wasteful, even if one does not factor in corruption.

Given the above, the other stated ambition regarding governance and development was to “agree concrete steps by the Afghan authorities to tackle corruption and improve financial management”. Improved financial management was elaborated on in the final communiqué to include “attaining fiscal sustainability over time”. Currently 45% of Afghanistan’s GDP is from international aid and, as a result, the vast majority of the government budget comes from foreign sources. While the Afghan government can be expected to attain more taxation ability in time, it is unrealistic to assume the Afghan state will be fiscally self-sufficient in the near future. Given the resources available the size of the public – and especially security – sector is unsustainable, and both are set to grow. Additionally, reconciliation and power sharing require an oversized government bureaucracy and some duplication of positions and structures. It will be difficult to simultaneously increase government resources and personnel and change government structures while also ensuring the incentive structure within the government keeps the desire and opportunities for corruption at a minimum.

Regional Support

The stated ambition regarding regional support was to “promote progress towards more systematic engagement by and between all regional stakeholders”. This ambition was possibly the most difficult to attain and the final communiqué reflected this, being as it was filled with political statements and objectives with little concrete ideas on how to attain these. Past projects, particularly between Afghanistan and Pakistan, were cited with little plan for their further development. The final communiqué called for “more coherent and structured approach

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to individual initiatives” and indicated this is a priority for the upcoming Kabul conference. Overall the communiqué indicated that a shift from current bi-lateral or tri-lateral arrangements to multi-lateral arrangements was a priority.

The most significant disappointment regarding regional support was the failure of Iran to attend the conference, despite being invited to do so. However, Iran has indicated a willingness to engage in regional initiatives in the future. Additionally, although Russia constructively engaged in the conference, they made few concrete commitments. On a more positive note, in his opening remarks President Karzai acknowledged the important roles that Saudi Arabia and Turkey are playing to assist in internal peace in Afghanistan and regional cooperation respectively. These countries’ engagement has served to bring other countries and groups to the table that might not have been willing, or invited, to participate in Western-led initiatives. The final communiqué also noted the significance of the European Union decision to appoint a single High Representative to Kabul.

Recommendations

The London conference has been rightly criticized for having some shortcomings. However, the conference was a high-level political gathering. As such, while it aimed to provide guidelines on how to improve security, governance and development, and regional support in Afghanistan, it kept these broad and left programme and policy elaboration for the future. Based on the conference’s stated aims and outcomes the following steps are recommended:

Security:

1. The EU should ensure that the Peace and Reintegration programme is structured in lines with the best practices established by experts in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. Material incentives should be asset (wealth), rather than income, based and accompanied by vocational training. Concentration should be placed on creating economic linkages and dependencies between assets held by possibly conflicting groups. Full disarmament should be recognized as unattainable at this

time and should not be forced. While the offering of ideological incentives should be left to the Afghan government, the international community must ensure Kabul honours its international treaty obligations and that they do not offer ideological concessions that are inconsistent with international norms and law.

2. Support should be given to the Afghan government to produce a National Security Strategy and Doctrine as soon as possible. While maintaining respect for Western norms, the EU and NATO training missions should then incorporate this doctrine in their training programmes and encourage others to do the same.

Governance and Development:

3. Given the inherent weaknesses of state-led development even greater attention will be required to the timing and sequencing of the anti-corruption programme, expansion of the public sector, and the influx of new funds. Despite the desire to rush these three aspects, they should not be implemented simultaneously. Given the EU's vast experience in just such development processes in the states of eastern Europe, it can provide valuable technical and monitoring of the same process in Afghanistan.

4. While the decision has been made to increase the powers of Kabul, the provinces must not be forgotten as independent actors that must be tied to each other as well as to the centre. Economic, social, and political links between the provinces should be encouraged. Furthermore, state-led development should not be pursued to the exclusion of civil-society actors and the EU should continue to work with and support bottoms-up initiatives.

Regional Support:

5. The new EU High Representative should focus on promoting regional cooperation and act as a mediator between parties. Despite the desirability of a multi-lateral regional solution, given the difficulty of attaining such an objective due to competing interests, the EU should continue to nurture bi-lateral or tri-lateral agreements of limited scope (single issue agreements). These can be used to build confidence between actors and simplify the environment,

paving the way for a larger multi-lateral agreement at a later date. Additionally, the EU High Representative should not be used as an alibi for less involvement by individual European states. Provided the EU states agree upon an overarching framework to guide European policy, bi-lateral engagement should not undermine the High Representative's mission and will give the EU multiple vectors from which to influence and monitor the Afghan government.

6. Current Western efforts to encourage deeper Russian involvement should continue, while being aware of Russia's historical sensitivity regarding Afghanistan. Turkey, on the hand, could take the lead in encouraging more and positive Iranian involvement.

Finally, while this division into the areas of security, governance and development, and regional support made the conference agenda manageable and contributed to ensuring agreements could be reached, further

programme development in any one of these areas must bear in mind the complex interdependency of all three factors. The EU, with its integrated development-security policies and instruments, can serve a vital role in ensuring the larger and long-term picture is kept in mind throughout the implementation of the new strategy and that the "quick impact projects" of the past give way to sustainable solutions for the future.

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