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Summary of

The Future of Afghanistan

J Alexander Thier, Ed. (USIP, 2009)

This new volume from USIP identifies weaknesses of early approaches in Afghanistan and outlines a vision for success going forward in a collection of essays by leading thinkers.

The Future of Afghanistan concludes that US policy toward Afghanistan will require a fundamental shift in order to stabilize that country. A focused, coherent, and long-term approach to Afghan and regional stability is necessary to get Afghanistan out of its vicious cycle of insecurity, insurgency, impunity, and corruption.

Unrealistic, short-term thinking has beset Afghanistan. To address this, the essays in *The Future of Afghanistan* discuss key problems and prospects over a ten-year horizon. Insecurity, whether due to insurgency, terrorism, regional meddling, or warlordism undermines the potential for progress on all other fronts in Afghanistan. While additional international forces may be needed, any effort to establish stability through troop increases alone will lead to short-term improvements at best. Ultimately, success is impossible without competent Afghan security institutions. Of equal importance is the legitimacy of the Afghan government itself and its will and capacity to implement the rule of law. While growing violence in Afghanistan must be brought under control, the U.S. and the international community must get back to the basics by placing critical focus on rule of law, economic empowerment and the regional context.

The future of Afghanistan also depends upon the ability of its national and local leaders to organize for a common, positive purpose. The international community and the Afghan government must engage the capacity of the broader Afghan society, making them the engine of progress rather than unwilling subjects of rapid change. The new formula is one where the central government continues to ensure security and justice on the national level and uses its position to channel international assistance to promote the rule of law and development at the community level.

Finally, the U.S. must work with Afghanistan's neighbors to create a regional environment conducive to Afghanistan's success. Regional competition continues to undermine Afghanistan's long-term prospects, whereas renewed regional cooperation could provide a significant security and economic boost in Afghanistan, Pakistan and the region as a whole.

What is needed now is a coherent strategy to bridge the gap between conflict and democracy, between burkas and women's equality, between tribal councils and a Supreme Court. The next decade must be about building those bridges. The first step is to realign joint priorities and expectations. The solution going forward is a melding of top-down and bottom-up approaches, creating a condominium of central government institutions addressing larger challenges beyond the capacities of communities while enabling local capacity to deal with other issues.

Under such a framework, central government would be responsible for those issues requiring collective action, such as fighting insurgents, building primary roads, regulating media, and protecting basic rights. Community-based structures would be heavily engaged in local governance issues such as water management, agricultural development, and dispute resolution. Civil society and private enterprise would expand media, protection of basic rights, and revitalization of culture. Such an approach would increase citizen participation, develop civil society, improve the delivery of basic services at the local level, and enhance the legitimacy of both national and local institutions.

The Future of Afghanistan makes ten key recommendations:

- 1) **Prioritize:** We must get back to the basics, addressing security, governance and rule of law, economic development with a focus on agriculture, and positive regional engagement. We must concentrate Afghan and international resources on tackling a few key problems effectively.
- 2) **Secure the Population:** The security of the population must become the primary objective of international and Afghan security forces. Security will create the space for political, social, and economic development.
- 3) **Build Afghan Security Forces:** Ultimately, Afghanistan can only be secured by Afghans. We must redouble efforts to build capable and legitimate Afghan military and police to protect Afghanistan and its citizens.
- 4) **Think Nationally, Act Locally:** Efforts to promote governance, dispute resolution, economic development, and human rights should be planned and implemented at the local level, using international, national, and local resources to marry bottom-up with top-down approaches. Afghan citizens must become the engine of economic, political, and social progress.
- 5) **Improve Governance and Rule of Law:** The legitimacy of the Afghan government depends upon its ability and willingness to govern fairly and implement the rule of law. Intensive effort is required to make provincial and local government capable and trusted.
- 6) **End Impunity:** Numerous Afghan government officials at all levels and their affiliates are engaged in corruption and other criminal enterprises and have committed human rights abuses in the past and present, tarnishing the reputation of government and the international community and undermining stability. Accountability must become the new regime in Afghanistan.
- 7) **Focus on Agriculture:** Afghanistan needs a “food surge” to boost economic development, food security, and provide an alternative to the opium economy. Enhanced agricultural production, a core of the Afghan economy, will rapidly produce much needed employment and trade.
- 8) **Engage Citizens and Civil Society:** Promoting democracy, human and women’s rights, culture, and media freedoms requires Afghan civil society and an informed, mobilized citizenry. Afghan ownership in these critical and sensitive areas requires Afghan leadership throughout the country.
- 9) **Address Regional Challenges:** We must engage intensively with Afghanistan's neighbors to improve the regional environment and reduce competition. Renewed regional cooperation on security, trade, and counter-narcotics could provide a significant security and economic boost.
- 10) **Adopt a Realistic, Long-Term Vision:** Afghanistan faces enormous long-term challenges, and Afghans must become the master of their own destiny. Without abandoning core principles, we must also be realistic about how quickly sustainable, Afghan-led change can occur.

A brief chapter-by-chapter summary highlights key issues:

Introduction: Building Bridges, J Alexander Thier

US policy toward Afghanistan requires a fundamental shift in order to stabilize that country. Unrealistic, short-term thinking has beset Afghanistan. A focused, coherent, and long-term approach to Afghan and regional stability is necessary to get Afghanistan out of its vicious cycle of insecurity, insurgency, impunity, and corruption. Our priorities must be:

- The first priority is to **prioritize** - it is essential that we begin to do a few things well rather than doing many things poorly
- Insecurity, whether due to insurgency, terrorism, regional meddling, or warlordism undermines the potential for progress on all other fronts - without **competent Afghan security institutions** success is impossible
- The **legitimacy** of the Afghan government, and especially its will and capacity to **implement the rule of law**, must be the center of gravity for our efforts
- An engaged, empowered, and informed population is the key to sustainable progress: we must **engage the capacity of Afghan society** through bottom-up approaches, making them the engine of progress rather than unwilling subjects of rapid change

Chapter 2: The Transformation of the Afghan State, Barnett Rubin

The Afghan state remains dangerously weak from a number of internal and external threats to its stability. An increasingly mobilized and active population is placing demands on a government that cannot yet meet them, while corruption runs rife and outside powers continue to vie for power and influence. Important policy actions to cope with such complex and volatile demands include:

- Expanding **higher education and employment** opportunities for the youth
- Development of a **recurrent and long-term budget** (Afghan and/or US) to provide much needed stable financing to Afghan security forces
- Concerted effort to **combat corruption and strengthen the legitimacy** of the government

Chapter 3: The Future of Security Institutions, Ali A. Jalali

Success in Afghanistan is not possible without competent security architecture that can provide the necessary space for political and economic institutions to develop. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF, police and military) need to be rebuilt and reinforced in order to meet this challenge and gain legitimacy in the eyes of the people. It is imperative that the Afghan government and the international community therefore:

- Significantly increase their efforts to **develop an effective security force**
- **Train and equip** the ANSF not only to derail insurgents and terrorists, but crucially, to uphold **justice, rule of law and good governance**
- Realign national and international efforts along a **broader security agenda** based upon depoliticized appointments and concerted efforts to root out corruption
- Commit to **long-term funding** and support to meet these ongoing needs

Chapter 4: The Long Democratic Transition, Grant Kippen

Seven years after the Bonn Agreement, minimal progress towards achieving a modern democratic state has been made. The main challenge to achieving this goal is a lack of programmatic vision on how democratic principles can be fostered and strengthened among diverse stakeholders and communities. The international community must therefore:

- **Streamline its cooperative efforts** to strengthen government institutions and legitimacy
- Support the development of **mature political parties** through financial and technical aid
- Pursue comprehensive **education programs** that fully engage the Afghan population for their **active** understanding and participation in democratic processes

Chapter 5: The Politics of Mass Media, Amin Tarzi

The freedom to express and disseminate information in Afghanistan is unmatched in any previous period in its history. Ensuring a climate in which mass media can freely operate is fundamental to the creation and maintenance of a vibrant democracy. The low quality of available media and opposition to this newfound freedom, however, is a threat to the establishment of a vibrant culture of national debate and independent media. The government must therefore:

- Work to **establish a sound legal framework** in which media rights are enshrined as fundamental freedoms
- Seek to **educate and professionalize** media practitioners
- **Withdraw its ownership** of media outlets

Chapter 6: A Human Rights Awakening?, Nader Naderi

The concept of “human rights” has a strong religious, social and moral basis in Afghan culture. However, implementing these rights in a time of increasing insecurity proves challenging. A culture of ignorance of and disrespect for core human rights pervades state institutions and traditional practices. To improve the situation, a thorough strategy must:

- **End impunity** for past and present crimes committed against the powerless
- **Transform the justice sector** through a comprehensive plan of capacity building and training for police, prosecutors, and the judiciary
- Engage with society to **eliminate socially rooted practices** that violate human rights
- **Hold the Afghan government accountable** to these commitments, conditioning international aid on the government’s progress in achieving human rights benchmarks.

Chapter 7: The Arrested Development of Afghan Women, Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam

While a few elite women have prominent roles in Parliament and government, women rarely achieve power or prominence in the informal institutions that represent most Afghans outside of Kabul. Women cannot survive economically or socially without the support of their families, and insecurity further exacerbates gender inequality due to the increased restriction of women’s liberties. The state has been unable to protect women against violence, sexual assault, abductions and forced marriages, which are common in conflict-ridden areas. To improve the role of women in Afghan society, a variety of measures should be considered:

- The state and local leadership must take stronger positions vis-à-vis **violence against women**, and must improve their access to formal and informal justice mechanisms.
- **Improved quality and access to education** for girls is critical
- Afghan women must **develop social and political solidarity networks** to advance understanding and enforcement of rights.

Chapter 8: Culture and Contest, Jolyon Leslie

Following years of foreign intervention and occupation, many Afghans feel that their culture is under siege. The Afghan government frequently opposes loosening of restrictions on the media and the arts, claiming that their control is essential for the defense of Afghan values and the maintenance of national stability. While a strategy of cultural development is necessary, it must be realistic and reflect the actual capacity of Afghan institutions and people. An effective approach towards cultural development should:

- **Educate future generations** of Afghans who are more likely to safeguard their heritage and participate in cultural initiatives if aware of the rich base they can draw upon
- **Include ordinary Afghans**, the custodians of traditional culture, in debates about the direction of development
- **Create institutions** that can effectively facilitate—rather than control—the arts and media
- **Learn lessons** from the successes and failures of other cultural initiatives from the region

Chapter 9: Afghanistan and Its Region, William Maley

Afghanistan's ability to create and maintain long-term stability will depend on how well the country can navigate regional relations marred by patterns of distrust and interference. Afghanistan must work to improve its relations with powerful state actors in the region while reducing negative non-state and sub-state actors' influence. To that end:

- **Prioritize regional cooperation** and efforts to increase cooperative ties between India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran
- Work to **reduce extremist and insurgent operations** launched from Pakistani soil
- Pursue creative ways to foster regional cooperation through **U.S. resource commitments and firmer pressure** on its Afghan and Pakistani allies

Chapter 10: The Intertwined Destinies of Afghanistan and Pakistan, Weinbaum & Humayoon

With a preponderance of common concerns—intersecting national security and economic considerations, overlapping ethnic communities and tensions, a lawless shared border and a history of troubled relations—Pakistan and Afghanistan's futures will be intimately linked. Failure or instability in one country can have a direct and negative impact in the other. It is therefore clear that Afghanistan and Pakistan pursue joint progress on a number of key fronts:

- Resolve the **border dispute** and **extend the rule of law** by both governments
- **Combat the insurgency and extremism** and deny safe haven to insurgents in Pakistan
- **Expand trade and energy cooperation** in key development sectors, sharing the burdens and rewards of large-scale development projects, such as the proposed TAPI pipeline, to strengthen ties and incentives for political cooperation
- Recognize **mutual strategic interests** and agree on the means to secure them

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