

# The Challenges and the Benefits for U.S. National Security of Providing Foreign Assistance to Afghanistan

## Addendum: Responses to Post-Hearing Questions for the Record

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*The Challenges and the Benefits for U.S. National Security of  
Providing Assistance to Afghanistan*

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Addendum to testimony before the Committee on Senate Homeland Security and Government  
Affairs Committee  
Subcommittee on Spending Oversight and Emergency Management  
United States Senate

Submitted June 28, 2018

Following the hearing on Wednesday, May 9, 2018, the congressional committee sought additional information and requested answers to the questions in this document. These answers were submitted for the record.

## Questions from Senator Gary C. Peters

### Question 1

*In the most recent Quarterly Report to Congress, SIGAR's Lessons Learned Program states that, although Afghanistan was initially characterized as a "post-conflict nation" in 2002, "In retrospect, it was unrealistic to expect sustainable economic growth in an environment in which an insurgency and other forms of insecurity and uncertainty were increasingly present." This touches upon the danger of setting expectations based on optimism rather than a frank assessment of conditions. This can be true when conducting oversight as well since there is risk in applying peacetime metrics to a wartime mission. **How do you reconcile audit standards and mission objectives when assessing the execution of the U.S. reconstruction mission in Afghanistan? How do we measure success and failure? What challenges and opportunities do***

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***you see in the current methodology for audits and investigations, and are there changes that should be made to ensure this audit methodology better supports overall oversight activities in Afghanistan? If taxpayers are footing the bill for programs that live on in perpetuity despite not achieving their stated goals, what good are metrics if no amount of realistic spending can achieve them?***

**Answer**

Audit standards for assistance programs necessarily should focus on efficiency of execution; adequacy of metrics; how well programs are meeting their stated objectives; and detection of waste, fraud, and abuse. It is more difficult, however, for auditing to grapple with assessing the impact of spending on progress toward achieving broad policy goals in complex overseas missions—that is, in terms of mission “success” or “failure”—particularly considering that assistance is only one potential contributor to such outcomes. And it is also more difficult for auditing to grapple with questions of what should be considered “waste” in particular circumstances and whether some level of waste should be regarded as a tolerable transaction cost. This is not to say that auditing standards should be changed but, rather, that auditing results need to be viewed in context. Attention should be paid to the limits of what audits reveal about the value of assistance in missions driven by U.S. national security interests.

For instance, in a mission like the one in Afghanistan (but not unique to that mission), there are times when it may be justifiable to spend funds to achieve short-term stabilization objectives, win the allegiance of particular individuals or groups, or support war-fighting requirements. At such times, there may be at least tactical value in accepting the risk or even likelihood of some waste because of the exigencies of the circumstances. In some situations, spending to achieve short-term stabilization could be a prerequisite for establishing a baseline of security sufficient to allow longer-term efforts to succeed.

One lesson for oversight of future interventions may be to urge policymakers to be clearer about when, in their spending decisions, they are weighting short-term needs more heavily than longer-term impacts. Relatedly, there could be value in conducting oversight in a way that enables policymakers to frankly acknowledge risks and some degree of anticipated waste rather than claim “sustainability” and minimization of risk even when unrealistic. Frank interactions in this regard could put both congressional overseers and policymakers in better positions to judge the policy merits, or lack thereof, of spending allocations and to set realistic benchmarks for progress.

This points to another lesson from Afghanistan: Characterizing assistance programs conducted during conflict, rather than post-conflict, as “reconstruction” unhelpfully obscures clarity about mission objectives, contextual constraints, and likely results—and thus creates challenges for auditing and oversight. In Afghanistan, the first few years after the United States toppled the Taliban regime were relatively quiescent, and U.S. spending in that period was relatively modest. “Reconstruction” assistance surged once the conflict intensified and the situation could not, in any genuine respect, be considered post-conflict. Assistance efforts in Afghanistan were then framed as being geared toward producing sustainable outcomes even in areas in which experience would have suggested that such outcomes would be exceedingly

difficult to achieve on the planned timelines in a country still mired in conflict and having a very low baseline level of development.

Many of the activities in Afghanistan characterized as “reconstruction,” “nation-building,” or elements of “counterinsurgency” have actually differed little from development activities—except that they were planned to achieve different (political and security-oriented) ends and to be accelerated beyond any normal development parameters in terms of timelines, spending volumes, and achievements. One lesson that can be drawn from this experience is that money, donor will, and urgency are not sufficient to produce stability by speeding up development results.

Development results have been achieved in Afghanistan—and at comparatively impressive rates until spending began to decline after 2014. As noted in my prepared testimony, assistance programs have resulted in important advances in socioeconomic indicators, such as health, education, per capita income, and life expectancy. Other areas, such as infrastructure, have seen mixed results, and many governance-oriented programs have produced only limited outcomes. But Afghanistan’s continued high degree of aid dependency in both security and development is at odds with the inflated rhetoric, or even genuine expectations, of significant progress toward self-sufficiency, and stability remains elusive.

## Question 2

*Your testimony indicates that the Afghan government and security institutions currently providing a modicum of stability in the country are in large part dependent on U.S. aid in its present form, and that the rapid elimination of this financing would lead to a significant deterioration of the security situation in Afghanistan. Despite these facts on the ground, U.S. taxpayers cannot be expected to foot this bill in perpetuity. **In your judgment, on the continuum of options for adjusting the longer-term U.S. presence in Afghanistan, how should we responsibly reduce our spending while best serving U.S. national security interests?***

## Answer

First, it should be noted that U.S. spending on civilian, nonsecurity programs has already been significantly reduced over the past several years. The gradualism of this change has enabled U.S. agencies to manage the reductions responsibly and continue to leverage U.S. spending in soliciting contributions from other donors. U.S. spending in support of the Afghan security forces is the far greater portion of overall spending, however, and it is the area in which the Afghan government’s dependence on foreign financing is most acute. It has long been clear that the Afghan security forces built and sustained since 2002 with U.S. and NATO funding, training, and equipping would not be financed predominantly through Afghan government revenue in any foreseeable time frame. Given the role of these forces in countering the insurgency, there is no realistic prospect of greatly reducing U.S. spending on security in Afghanistan so long as the conflict with the Taliban continues—unless the United States is prepared to countenance the defeat of the Afghan government.

A negotiated settlement of the conflict offers the best prospect of enabling the reduction of Afghan security costs and of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. This would entail

reaching a compromise agreement to which the Afghan government, the Taliban, and the United States would be parties, and which would comprise political and security elements—including, necessarily, a commitment by the Taliban to renounce any future links with international terrorist groups. Although a settlement would not erase Afghanistan's aid dependence in the near term, it could improve the Afghan government's revenue potential by removing security-related obstacles to economic growth.

A settlement with the Taliban ending the insurgency also would enable the United States to focus its continuing security activities in the region more narrowly on counterterrorism goals. It is likely that a negotiated settlement with the Taliban would not lead all violent extremists in Afghanistan to lay down arms; there would probably be some Taliban affiliates or splinter elements that choose to stay outside a deal, and there would still be non-Taliban groups, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), that would pose a threat to U.S. interests. But the residual security challenges for the Afghan state, and residual risks to U.S. national security interests, would likely be much smaller than they are today.