



ANA 205th Corps Commander Brigadier General Dawood Shah Wafadar and Train, Advise, and Assist Command–South Commander U.S. Army Brigadier General Paul Bontrager conduct aerial battlefield familiarization flight in southern Afghanistan, August 4, 2015 (DOD/Kristine Volk)

Eight Signs Our Afghan Efforts Are Working

By Richard H.M. Outzen

As the defense attaché tasked with reopening the U.S. Defense Attaché Office in Kabul, Afghanistan, beginning in late 2014, I had the opportunity to watch

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“fighting season 2015” unfold from a proximate vantage point.¹ I returned with the impression that Afghanistan is better than it might have been—and stable enough to warrant continued investment. In this article, I contend that the high level of American (and Western) pessimism regarding Afghanistan’s security status deserves reexamination. I offer some thoughts on why pessimism has come to domi-

nate policy debates on Afghanistan, as well as observations on the realities of Afghanistan in 2014–2015 that merit balanced reassessment. I then conclude with eight observations that provide some basis for optimism for 2016 and beyond.

It is not unfair for analysts to point out that Afghanistan has had its share of dark days in 2015, including those of August 7–8 when a trio of attacks

in Kabul left 48 people dead and more than 300 injured, and the Taliban seizure of Kunduz City for several days in early autumn.² Yet given generally pessimistic assessments of how ready the Afghan government and security forces were to survive the departure of most Western troops at the beginning of the year, it is fair to state that, from a U.S. perspective, the worst outcomes have not materialized. Based on the 2015 fighting season—a long one, since the Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) opened it with major operations in February and March—it appears that Afghanistan is stable enough to create space for political progress and that the sustained partnership may suffice to keep it so. There are trends and signs of growth, outlined below, that mark this as a watershed when compared to the past decade. While it is possible that economic and political efforts may lag behind relative progress in the realm of security—perhaps enough to undo that progress over time—there is reason for guarded optimism as 2016 begins.

Dire Predictions

The U.S. Intelligence Community and segments of the media have been consistently pessimistic in recent years regarding the prospects for stability in Afghanistan after coalition drawdown. The persistent tone of this skepticism seems to have been established in gloomy National Intelligence Estimates (NIEs) of 2008 and 2010.³ The late-2013 NIE reportedly went even further, setting a tone of expected failure that would persist throughout 2014 and into 2015, despite significant political and operational changes in Afghanistan during that time. The *Washington Post* described the 2013 version:

A new American intelligence assessment on the Afghan war predicts that the gains the United States and its allies have made during the past three years are likely to have been significantly eroded by 2017, even if Washington leaves behind a few thousand troops and continues bankrolling the impoverished nation, according to officials familiar with the report.

*The National Intelligence Estimate, which includes input from the country's 16 intelligence agencies, predicts that the Taliban and other power brokers will become increasingly influential as the United States winds down its longest war in history, according to officials who have read the classified report or received briefings on its conclusions. The grim outlook is fueling a policy debate inside the Obama administration about the steps it should take over the next year as the U.S. military draws down its remaining troops.*⁴

Pessimism was echoed in the public sphere as well. Stephen Biddle of the Council on Foreign Relations argued, for instance, that the ultimate failure of the Afghan forces was so certain that the United States would be best served to either cut a deal with the Taliban sooner rather than later or to end its participation altogether.⁵ Former U.S. Ambassador Karl Eikenberry described American counterinsurgency in Afghanistan as an unequivocal failure, and lumped it together with Vietnam as another failed effort.⁶ Some who defend continued serious U.S. involvement in Afghanistan, such as Anthony Cordesman at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, have also expressed deep misgivings about the readiness of the ANDSF and the cohesiveness of the Afghan government.⁷ Negative assessments were also widespread among both Afghans and foreign officials within Afghanistan.⁸ These projections reflected the concerns and dynamics of late 2013 and 2014, but are overdue for assessment in light of the past year's developments.

Policy critics raised valid concerns, and the absence of catastrophe this year neither invalidates those particular concerns nor precludes dramatic deterioration in the future. Furthermore, the clear developmental gaps in Afghan security forces and institutions are not a matter of debate or interpolation; they are facts.⁹ One fighting season during which a largely independent ANDSF survives does not clear the slate. It does, however, indicate that worst-case planning for Afghanistan increasingly looks like remote-case planning, and that U.S. policymakers should

take note of the changed trajectory as they consider the costs and benefits of sustained investment there.

What the Numbers Don't Say

Judgments about progress in the Afghan conflict come with the caveat that unclassified information is less abundant and comprehensive than was once the case. From 2009 through 2014, a variety of statistical parameters were tracked and published in unclassified form under Section 1230 of Public Law 110-181 (the so-called 1230 reports).¹⁰ These reports were issued semi-annually, but military reporting was criticized as decreasingly transparent after 2011, and in 2013 the International Security Assistance Force headquarters had to retract some data it had used in previous years to assert progress in the campaign.¹¹ Since that time, public data have become less abundant and less comprehensive. The Intelligence Community, the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, and the headquarters for Operation *Resolute Support* continue to collect data related to overall security, but their products are not generally accessible to the public.¹² Perhaps the best, most consistently available set of security-related data is that compiled by the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR), a watchdog body that studies the impacts of U.S. civil and military assistance and includes non-U.S. data in its reports. Appearances before Congress or think tanks by *Resolute Support* senior leaders provide some amplifying data, as do occasional publications from the Afghanistan Analysts Network, the International Crisis Group, and other research organizations with focused efforts there. Although the amount of public reporting provided by the Department of Defense (DOD) has declined, Section 1225 of the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for 2015 still requires a semi-annual report to Congress that remains a valuable source of information. Together, these data sets reflect continued high levels of violence in 2015, and in some cases troubling



Afghan National Policemen take break between explosive ordnance disposal and IED defeat classes at ANP Central Training Center—Kabul (DOD/Charity Edgar)

security trends, but no evidence yet of dramatic deterioration of either the government's ability to govern or the ANDSF to fight. The numbers are striking in what they do *not* say—that despite the intentions of the Taliban and the fears of many observers, security in Afghanistan did not spiral out of control in 2015.

During late 2014 and early 2015, the pattern of overall violence in Afghanistan conformed to the seasonal norms of previous years: a drop in insurgent attacks in fall and winter, an increase in spring, and a peak in the summer.¹³ SIGAR comparison of violent incidents per day in late 2014 and early 2015 found a slight decrease September through November 2014, a 10 percent increase December 2014 through February 2015, and a 6 percent increase from February through April 2015, compared to the same periods a year prior. Summer 2015 data showed nearly a 5 percent drop from

the previous year, impacted by Ramadan and insurgent infighting.¹⁴ The fighting has been bloody on both sides, and the government has lost control of nearly a dozen district centers for varying periods of time. Many of those districts, however, have been de facto beyond government control for most of the past decade, and most of the district centers that insurgents occupied came back under government control within days.¹⁵ Insurgents briefly held one provincial center (Kunduz), but they were driven out without having consolidated control over new or large areas. Theirs remains for the most part a hit-and-run fight, in a small number of cases a hit-linger-and-run affair.

DOD reporting to Congress indicates that, on a national basis, violence across Afghanistan was down in 2015 compared to 2014 for much of the year. Violence has decreased in the southern, eastern, and western regions of the country, while

increasing in the north. Violence in Kabul has also increased, a reflection of the fact that with foreign troops gone from much of the country, insurgents have begun to focus their attention more on the capital.¹⁶ The nature of the fighting has changed with the reduction of foreign troops and the increased advisory emphasis on Afghan forces aggressively pursuing the insurgents. With the exceptions of self-defense and certain predesignated global terror targets, *only* the ANDSF are now in fact authorized to engage in combat operations. This has led to a 59 percent increase in ANDSF casualties, a rise as predictable as it is concerning.¹⁷ While it is fair to say security conditions worsened in the latter half of 2015 as insurgents strove to show that ANDSF cannot secure the country on its own, it is unclear how long insurgents can maintain their level of support and effort when, at the end of 2015, they still could not take and hold population centers from government forces.¹⁸

The United Nations (UN) also tracks statistics related to insurgent attacks and overall violence in Afghanistan, primarily for its project related to protection of civilians in conflict areas. These statistics help feed both semi-annual reports to the Security Council on protection of civilians and to the Secretary General's periodic comprehensive reports on Afghanistan. UN numbers show a continuation into 2015 of the generally high levels of violence seen in 2014, and at some points increasing up to 10 percent. Summer fighting decreased overall by 4.6 percent compared to 2014.¹⁹ In the fall, insurgents launched 19 percent more attacks overall than they did the year prior, although the increase in effective (casualty-causing) attacks was a more modest 4 percent.²⁰ UN reports note that the high levels of violence had several contributing causes (for example, mild weather and the ANDSF initiating more operations). They also note that following periods of increased violence, levels dropped in response to ANDSF operations.²¹

What we are left with at the beginning of 2016 is a mixed picture: Afghanistan remains a violent and volatile country, facing steep challenges with imperfect tools. Given the incomplete nature of available data, observations from the field—admittedly anecdotal—can help round out public understanding of the current situation on the ground. Especially in the context of rapidly deteriorating crises in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Afghanistan in 2015 looks like a relative success and gives reason to think more progress is in store.

I finished my tour in Kabul in the late summer of 2015 as one convinced that this progress is feasible. My convictions come from signs I saw within the Afghan government, in its security forces, and in Afghanistan's evolving relationship with Pakistan. Here are eight observations based on my time there that provide a basis for optimism in 2016 and beyond.

The Observations

We Have a Committed Partner in the Afghan Palace. Americans who served in Afghanistan during the tenure

of President Hamid Karzai find Ashraf Ghani, seated in October 2014, a more serious and committed partner. The National Unity Government (NUG) agenda is consistent with major American national interests for Afghanistan: sustained bilateral partnership, reduced corruption, and a definitive end to the insurgencies. President Ghani spent much of his adult life in the United States, has written extensively on anticorruption programs, and has founded a nongovernmental organization dedicated to strengthening weak states.²² Ghani and his chief executive Abdullah Abdullah have begun to improve governance and international confidence, and have proved more willing than Karzai to try and work with Pakistan in matters of security.²³ Admittedly, there are warning signs of serious internal dysfunction: Ghani's temper, his alleged favoritism toward Pashtuns in security ministry assignments and corruption investigations, and his penchant for micromanagement are examples.²⁴

Tensions within the NUG are rife. Gradually, however, key appointments have been made and actual governance begun. As Commander of Operation *Resolute Support* General John Campbell, USA, has pointed out, predictions that the NUG would fail in its first year were frequently heard, but did not come to pass.²⁵ The advent of the NUG and Ghani's signing of the Bilateral Security Agreement ended the era of mutual mistrust and recrimination between the Afghan government and its closest backers—a huge and positive change from the preceding years.

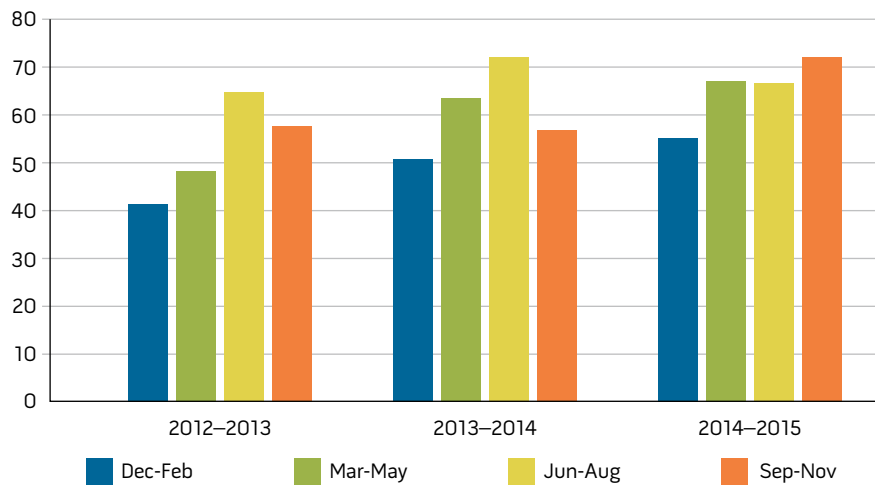
The U.S.-Afghan partnership is also well served by the current healthy state of the American military-civilian team in Kabul. The current Ambassador and the *Resolute Support* commander consult frequently, support mutually, and have linked their teams in a close and coordinated manner to support Afghan counterparts. This has not always been the case over the past decade.²⁶

ANDSF Is Surviving and Maturing, Albeit Unevenly. The shortcomings of the Afghan forces and security institutions are too many, and too serious, to dismiss.

But those forces are not collapsing, and there are pockets of true excellence developing. These include special units within both the Ministry of Defense (special operations forces *Kandaks* and *Kita-e Khas*) and the Ministry of Interior (crisis response units); military intelligence, which has greatly expanded collection and analytical capabilities; and the Special Mission Wing, which originated under the Interior Ministry but now supports the special operations of both ministries. Afghan artillery has shown its worth—especially the D-30 howitzers—providing effective fire support in remote areas. Challenges remain in keeping them operational and resupplied in a timely manner. Afghan commanders and staff are developing the ability to plan and coordinate multicorps operations with combined arms in various parts of the country. These operations have not been perfect: sequential not simultaneous, disruptive rather than decisive to the insurgents, and requiring the heavy involvement of senior Afghan officers and international mentors. That they occurred at all is indicative of a dramatic increase in ANDSF capabilities, though, and a key indicator of increasing professionalism.

Advisors have praised increasing self-sufficiency in previous years, but in 2015 the metaphorical safety net (combat enablers) provided by those advisors shrank, making this the first substantively independent test. Difficulties persist in the areas of logistics distribution systems, tactical mobility, and indigenous air support, among others. The ability of the Afghan government and security forces to improve quickly enough to sustain Western confidence remains an open question over the medium term. In 2015 the improvement was unmistakable, even during events as challenging as the August Kabul bombings: “Afghan security forces handled three complex emergencies almost simultaneously, proving perhaps that training of Afghan forces has paid off. . . . In none of the three attacks, scattered widely around the capital, did the insurgents manage to breach their targets' inner defenses. Most of the victims were outside the walls, either passersby or defenders at the gates.”²⁷

Figure 1. Security Incidents Per Day, 2013–2015



Formal assessment of the fighting in 2015 has stretched into early 2016, but by late summer the overall trend was clear:

This year, the Taliban have advanced in some contested rural districts. . . . But the insurgency can't boast of spectacular victories that changed the course of the war. All of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals remain in government hands, as does the vast majority of district headquarters. Overall levels of violence, according to Afghan and U.S. military officials, are comparable to last year's. This ability to maintain the precarious status quo even after more than 120,000 U.S.-led coalition troops have departed the country represents, by itself, an important achievement.²⁸

Engagements between ANDSF and the insurgents in 2015 basically followed one of three patterns. The first consisted of large (multibattalion), fairly complex, well-scripted, and coached operations involving multiple services and corps. Such operations were conducted in northern Helmand, Zabul-Ghazni, the “iron triangle” of Azrah-Hesarak-Surobi, and elsewhere. These operations did not have lasting effects on the target areas—that will take time and better government provision of services—but they disrupted insurgent operations and prevented them from consolidating control over many rural districts. The second type of fighting was the cat-and-mouse game

over ANDSF checkpoints (occasionally district and in one case a provincial center), with insurgents grouping to attack weakly guarded areas before fleeing the advance of reinforcements. The third and least-publicized type of fighting was the steady drumbeat of small, intelligence-driven raids against select targets, typically more senior leaders or imminent terror threats. While the second type of fight (the checkpoint fights) inflicted serious casualties and made frequent headlines, the other patterns kept the insurgents off balance and inflicted serious damage on their leaders and units in the field. ANDSF still suffer many shortcomings, institutionally and operationally: supply distribution must improve, checkpoints must be consolidated, mobility and air power are immature, and intelligence-sharing must occur with greater speed and reach.²⁹ Senior ANDSF leaders understand the areas of weakness and (assuming continued external advice and support) have every intention of resolving them.³⁰ Given the serious shift in responsibilities from coalition to ANDSF this year, it has been a performance that gives cause for optimism.

ANDSF Attrition Is Serious but Manageable. The Afghan National Army, National Police, and National Directorate of Security fought hard and suffered significant casualties in 2015 as they had in 2014, but the result was concern, not crisis, for both the Afghan government

and the Afghan public. It is true that attrition reached troubling levels early in the year—4,000 security force members per month. It bears mentioning, though, that the 4,000 figure represents not only battle deaths, but also all losses (including Absent Without Leave and Dropped from Rolls [DFR]; in other words, those who chose or were compelled to leave service). The single largest component of attrition is DFR, and observers consider it sensitive to improvements in soldier quality of life and leadership.³¹ We must also consider that casualties and attrition *should* trend up as operational tempo (OPTEMPO) increases. This occurred in 2014, and the high 2015 numbers are a continuation of that trend. The factors driving the trend are not mysterious, nor are they an indicator of insurgent success per se: “the combination of an increased OPTEMPO, assumption of greater security responsibilities, drawdown of coalition forces, and an aggressive pursuit of the insurgency have all contributed to the increase in casualty rates.”³² Concerns about the sustainability of the ANDSF, given higher casualties and attrition, have been raised by qualified observers, but this has more to do with factors within Afghan control—that is, how they recruit and retain soldiers—than it does with enemy effectiveness.³³ General Campbell has pointed out that 5 to 7 percent higher casualties during a four-fold increase in operations are not an indicator that attrition is impacting combat readiness and that young Afghans are still signing up to fight.³⁴ He has also denied that the current casualty and attrition rates are unsustainable if ANDSF leaders give priority to remedying those factors they can control.³⁵

Resolute Support leaders and the Afghan security ministries have indeed focused effort on understanding and remedying the causes of force attrition, and the rates dropped over the course of 2015. By May 2015 the Afghan National Army (ANA) monthly average attrition rate stood at 2.3 percent, compared with 2.55 percent in January 2015 and well down from the average rates in 2013 and 2014 of 3.52 percent and 3.62 percent, respectively. The Afghan National Police

average monthly attrition also dropped from January to May of last year, from 1.64 percent to 1.56 percent.³⁶ Overall ANDSF force levels rose over the course of the fighting season. Once the intake and training of new recruits pick up in the fall and winter months, it should be possible to further close the gap between authorized force levels and the number actually serving. The perspective provided by one former senior security official is worth remembering. The Soviet-backed Afghan army survived and grew during the 1980s while suffering 2,000 battle deaths per year on a population base of 12 million; the ANA is suffering roughly 2,000 per year on a base of 31 million. Each death is regrettable and tragic, but in a society accustomed to its young men fighting and dying, such numbers are far from unsustainable.³⁷ Senior Afghan leaders, including Minister of Interior Noor-ul-Haq Olomi, have similarly assessed that the losses are tragic, but do not constitute a crisis.³⁸ Afghans take casualty reports with a great deal more equanimity than do Western observers, meaning that in political as well as demographic terms the numbers are sustainable.

Afghans Are Adapting to a Resource-Constrained Environment. During my time in Kabul, I witnessed the Afghans adapting to a more constrained resource environment in which Western aid was less freely given. Afghans are adapting, both fiscally and operationally. While difficult, over the long term the adjustments made in the Afghan government and in society will boost both accountability and donor confidence, and, through this, the sustainability of long-term aid. Discipline in security-related budgeting and expenditure has been greatly enhanced since late 2014 through the introduction of conditionality measures by Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan (CSTC-A). CSTC-A Commander Major General Todd Semonite, USA, has instituted a system of Letters of Commitment, through which ANDSF leaders acknowledge the purpose and proper usage of funds.³⁹

Corruption has been attacked through an aggressive series of



Afghan national police officer prepares to accompany members of Kunar PRT on foot patrol through downtown Asadabad (U.S. Air Force/Nicholas Mercurio)

investigations and reforms, including the institution of palace-level review of virtually all government contracts and the suspension of senior officers associated with a corrupt fuel contract signed just before President Ghani took office.⁴⁰ The abuse of funds through inflated personnel strength reporting has been addressed through implementation of an Automated Human Resources Information Management System that will be tied to payment of salary and allowances.⁴¹

Meanwhile, *Resolute Support* advisory efforts have shifted focus from the field to the ministerial level, and have reorganized along functional lines to better focus on transparency, force generation, and effective resource management across ANDSF agencies.⁴² At the field/operational level, the Afghans have had to adjust to the absence of coalition advisors in formations below the corps level and to less robust close air support and other combat enablers. This has led to some degree of frustration in the ANDSF and legitimate debate about how much battlefield risk should be incurred in the drive to make it self-sufficient. On the positive side, the Afghans have become quite good at operating some of their own support platforms, especially Mi-17 helicopters and D-30 howitzers.⁴³ Afghan political and military leaders appear committed

to making the efficient use of available resources part of their organizational culture.

The Insurgents Have Serious Problems, Too. The year 2015 was a hard year for the Taliban and other insurgent groups. The death of Mullah Mohammed Omar, the accepted leader of the Taliban, was confirmed during the summer. Suspicions that he was dead hindered Taliban unity prior to the public announcement, and infighting over who should succeed him hampered unity in the field thereafter:

*Mansour was Omar's deputy. Many commanders were outraged that Mansour concealed news of Omar's death for more than two years and boycotted the meeting that appointed him. Mansour said the deception ensured Taliban unity amid the 2014 withdrawal of NATO [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] troops. . . . Small skirmishes over the leadership have already begun, some Taliban say.*⁴⁴

As 2015 wore on, the Taliban also had to worry about radical elements claiming affiliation with the Islamic State in Khorasan, which challenged them with both physical and rhetorical attacks. This “red on red” fighting occurred in several parts of the country and effectively presented the Taliban



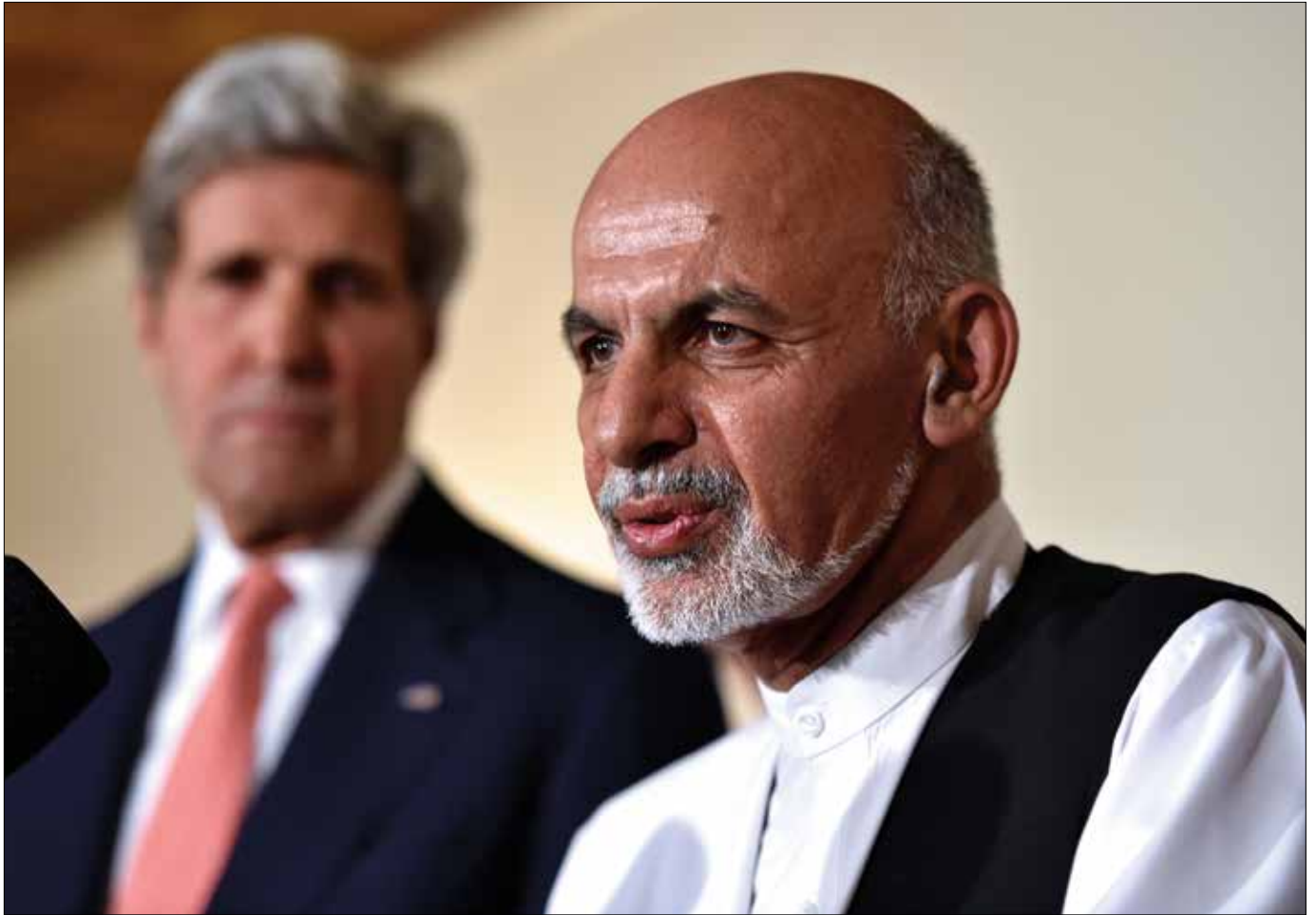
Dand District governor talks with U.S. Army deputy commander of Train, Advise, and Assist Command–South (left) and interpreter at Kandahar Airfield security shura, June 27, 2015 (DOD/Kristine Volk)

with a two-front war.⁴⁵ It is also worth noting that ANDSF-reported insurgent casualties were roughly three to four times higher in 2015 than the year prior; while such numbers tend toward exaggeration, United Nations reporting based on Taliban documents showed a steep rise in their casualties in 2013, and these losses can only have increased with the rise in overall incidents in 2014–2015.⁴⁶ Pakistan has moved more seriously against terrorist activity on its territory, including scaling back support to at least some Afghan insurgents in the wake of the deadly attack on a school in Peshawar in December 2014.⁴⁷ This has led to a more serious and sustained series of discussions involving officials from Pakistan and Afghanistan regarding political reconciliation between the Taliban and the Afghan government.⁴⁸ The talks have yet to produce substantive steps

to end the conflict, but have improved mutual understanding and may lead to solid progress. Afghan and Western counterparts may still mistrust Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence, but some have come to believe Pakistan Chief of Army Staff Raheel Sharif is sincere in his desire to rein in militants. In any case, Pakistani analysts have recognized that the departure of most U.S. troops, coupled with the more accommodating policies of Ghani, present Islamabad the opportunity to rebalance its approach in ways that help stabilize both its neighbor and itself.⁴⁹

Kabul Is Thriving: More Modern and Cosmopolitan and Still Relatively Secure. It may be hard to notice for observers who have not stayed in Kabul for extended stays separated by an interval of some years, but dramatic changes have taken place in the Afghan capital over

the past decade. The routine availability of electricity and telecommunications access ranks high on the list, given the transformative effects that access has on education, political participation, and economic activity. Kabul is now home to roughly 4 million Afghans of all ethnic groups and is producing a generation of young Afghans accustomed to schooling, following global issues, and interacting daily with people from other parts of the country (or other countries). Insurgent attacks still occur, and will continue. In short bursts of activity (late November 2014, early August 2015), attacks in Kabul spike from time to time. After a rise in intensity in late 2014, though, overall attacks in Kabul in 2015 have remained steady.⁵⁰ With the coalition presence increasingly limited to Kabul and its environs, it follows that insurgents will increasingly focus their attacks there.



John Kerry listens as Afghan presidential candidate Ashraf Ghani addresses reporters at UN Mission Headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan, July 2014 (State Department)

It is notable then that insurgents only rarely manage to successfully target coalition troops, that they kill far more Afghan civilians than they do foreign troops, and that they remain the primary threat to Afghan civilians.⁵¹ While as noted the Afghans are rather inured to such casualties, over time they will increasingly damage insurgent narratives of defending the country and its people from foreign occupation. The bottom line is that if insurgents could not seriously shake Kabul in 2015, it is hard to see how they will be better positioned to do so in subsequent years, as the unity government and ANDSF mature further.

The Neighbors May Be Nervous Enough to Work Together. The drawdown of U.S. troops in Afghanistan has created both uncertainty and opportunity for Pakistan, China, Russia, and Iran. Against the backdrop of worsening relations

with the West, Russia has motive and opportunity in Afghanistan to maintain some level of cooperation and communication with the United States and its NATO partners.⁵² The Chinese, anxious to protect economic opportunities and to get a handle on the grave problem of a radical Islamist safe haven in Afghanistan that stokes China's Uighur insurgent problem, are expanding engagement with the Afghan government. More importantly, they are pressing Pakistan to do all they can to secure a negotiated settlement with the Taliban.⁵³ In the wake of both the U.S. drawdown and the Iranian nuclear deal, Afghanistan stands to benefit substantially from increased regional investment by Iran and perhaps also from tacit U.S.-Iranian cooperation within Afghanistan.⁵⁴ Pakistan seems increasingly reconciled to the fact that the Taliban will not rule Afghanistan, that the

costs of large-scale support or toleration of insurgent groups are decreasingly justifiable, and that some form of political participation in Kabul by the Taliban and those they represent is the most desirable outcome.⁵⁵ They may hedge their bets, but seem inclined to significantly reduce their investment in insurgency. The fortuitous combination of Karzai's departure and the reduction of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan has created space for improved cooperation between Western donors and these neighboring states, whose goals seem more aligned now. The breadth and size of Kabul's military diplomatic community—especially the robust attaché contingents from these neighboring states—reflect an enhanced readiness for dialogue.

The Biggest Variable Determining Afghanistan's Fate Remains Our Commitment. An Afghan general who



President Ashraf Ghani addresses members of Afghan National Army Special Operations Command during visit to Camp Commando, Afghanistan, October 6, 2014 (U.S. Army/Daniel Shapiro)

works closely with Western counterparts opened a meeting in early 2015 by stating, “Now I know you Americans have lost all interest in Afghanistan, but there remain for us a few matters to discuss.” He was only half-joking; many Afghans feared that with major crises in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, the United States had largely ceased paying attention to Afghanistan and was interested only in reducing resource commitments. This would be unfortunate, for the trajectory of recent events in Afghanistan shows far more positive trends than we find in other crisis spots across the region. Afghanistan’s starting point in 2001 for security, development, and governance was so low that even given the significant progress achieved to date, the remaining challenges are significant and the chance of failure real. With a continued investment of moderate scope—both in years and in billions of dollars—the United States can buy down that risk of

failure and end up with a stable state in Afghanistan.

The army of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan fought effectively for several years after the withdrawal of Soviet troops—in fact, only with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of assistance funding did they fail.⁵⁶ Similarly, between 1972 and 1975 American military assistance to South Vietnam was cut from \$2.8 billion to \$700 million, and then down to \$300 million; by 1975 their army collapsed.⁵⁷ The lesson is clear: having left an army that can and will fight, the United States and other Western donors need to ponder further cuts and drawdowns in a gradual manner.

Current U.S. assistance levels of roughly \$4 billion per year in security assistance and \$2 billion more in economic assistance are significant costs, and rightfully should curtail over time.⁵⁸ The return on that significant investment has been dramatic in terms of social and

developmental progress, leading many foreign policy analysts to call for patience in sustaining the effort.⁵⁹ There is no push from the U.S. public or policymakers to ramp down that funding, at least not yet. Conversely, there has been pressure to quickly reduce the number of U.S. troops advising and administering assistance to the Afghans. The pressure was largely self-imposed; U.S. policymakers set a goal of 1,000 troops or fewer by 2017, despite the absence of any pressure from the American public or the people or government of Afghanistan to do so.⁶⁰ In a sense this reflects the logic of the Karzai years in Afghanistan, with declining trust and declining mutual confidence between U.S. and Afghan leadership.

A year into Ghani’s tenure, with a year’s worth of fighting and proven viability, the Obama administration appears to have recognized the need to critically reassess the assumptions that were driving the steady decrease in forces. This

pragmatic approach should be applauded and sustained. The brief occupation of a provincial capital (Kunduz) by insurgents presented a pointed reminder that Afghanistan is fragile enough to warrant sustaining a significant commitment in terms of deployed U.S. and allied forces. More importantly, the demonstrated ability of the Afghan forces to stand and fight in 2015 showed that our continued investment is not lost on a hopeless cause; the Afghans are getting better as their share of the work grows. Indeed, there will be costs associated with maintaining our financial and troop commitments at or near current levels for a decade or more. The costs of state collapse or radical takeover would undoubtedly be higher still.⁶¹ Credible observers have called for a significant increase in troops from the current level. My experience has shown that force levels at or near what we have in country now would likely suffice. The Obama administration has agreed to maintain a force level of 9,800 U.S. forces and several thousand other international troops through much of 2016. We must be prepared to sustain such levels until we, and our partners and allies, agree that conditions have substantially improved and allow further reduction. This likely means through 2020 at a minimum.⁶² Stability in Afghanistan is not a sure thing, but the generally positive events of 2015 show that it is certainly feasible, and worth the modest additional investments to attain. JFQ

Notes

¹ The United States reestablished a Defense Attaché Office (DAO) shortly after the collapse of the Taliban regime, but it closed again in 2008–2009. DAOs are military diplomatic missions accredited to host nation governments and form a core part of the U.S. official presence in most countries. Under some conditions, however, they have been seen as redundant during large-scale U.S. combat operations. The reopening in 2014–2015 was part of the ongoing U.S. transition to a more traditional military and diplomatic presence in Afghanistan.

² W.J. Hennigan, “U.S. Military Investigates Deadly Air Strike in Afghanistan,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 2015, A4; Mujib Mashal, “Afghan Forces Seek to Regain

Kunduz, Major Northern City, From Taliban,” *New York Times*, September 29, 2015, available at <www.nytimes.com/2015/09/30/world/asia/afghan-forces-seek-to-regain-kunduz-city-from-taliban.html?_r=0>.

³ Mark Mazetti and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Study Is Said to Warn of Crisis in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, October 8, 2008, available at <www.nytimes.com/2008/10/09/world/asia/09afghan.html?pagewanted=all>; Elisabeth Bumiller, “Intelligence Reports Offer Dim View of Afghan War,” *New York Times*, December 14, 2010, available at <www.nytimes.com/2010/12/15/world/asia/15policy.html?_r=0>.

⁴ Ernesto Londoño, Karen DeYoung, and Greg Miller, “Afghanistan Gains Will Be Lost Quickly after Drawdown, U.S. Intelligence Estimate Warns,” *Washington Post*, December 28, 2013, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/afghanistan-gains-will-be-lost-quickly-after-drawdown-us-intelligence-estimate-warns/2013/12/28/ac609f90-6f32-11e3-aec8-85cb037b7236_story.html>.

⁵ Stephen Biddle, “Ending the War in Afghanistan: How to Avoid Failure on the Installment Plan,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 5 (September/October 2013).

⁶ Karl W. Eikenberry, “The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan: The Other Side of the COIN,” *Foreign Affairs* 92, no. 5 (September/October 2013).

⁷ Anthony Cordesman, *Transition in Afghanistan: Losing the Forgotten War?* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 26, 2015), 54–60.

⁸ International Crisis Group (ICG), Asia Report No. 256, *Afghanistan’s Insurgency after Transition* (Brussels: ICG, May 12, 2014), 2–4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42–44.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹¹ Cordesman, 61.

¹² Operation *Resolute Support* replaced the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) as the named NATO-led operation and organization for security assistance in Afghanistan as of January 1, 2015. Operation *Enduring Freedom* also ended on the last day of 2014, replaced by Operation *Freedom’s Sentinel*.

¹³ Excerpted from Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress* (Washington, DC: SIGAR, July 30, 2015), figure 3.26. SIGAR data are based on United Nations (UN) reporting rather than Operation *Resolute Support* or other U.S. Government databases. See also 93–120 of the same report.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 94. See also UN General Assembly Security Council, *The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security: Report to the Secretary-General*, A/70/359–S/2015/684 (New York: UN, September 1, 2015), 4/17.

¹⁵ Joseph Goldstein, “Afghan Army Is Test-

ed by the Taliban as Fighting Season Begins,” *New York Times*, April 13, 2015, available at <www.nytimes.com/2015/04/14/world/asia/afghan-army-is-tested-by-the-taliban-as-fighting-season-begins.html?_r=0>.

¹⁶ Department of Defense (DOD), *Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: DOD, June 8, 2015), 27–29.

¹⁷ Operation *Resolute Support* leaders, including General John Campbell, USA, and Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson, USA, have described the increased rate of casualties as unsustainable over the long term. The operation made the reduction of attrition a priority for 2015 and beyond.

¹⁸ DOD, *Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: DOD, December 15, 2015), 1–2.

¹⁹ UN General Assembly Security Council, *The Situation in Afghanistan*, September 1, 2015, 3–5.

²⁰ UN General Assembly Security Council, *The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security: Report to the Secretary-General*, A/70/601–S/2015/942 (New York: UN, December 10, 2015), 4–5; DOD, *Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, December 15, 2015, 19–20.

²¹ UN General Assembly Security Council, *The Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security: Report to the Secretary-General*, S/2015/147 (New York: UN, February 27, 2015), 3–5.

²² “Biography of President Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai,” n.d., available at <www.embassy-of-afghanistan.org/page/biography-of-president-dr-ashraf-ghani-ahmadzai>; and Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). In 2005, Ghani also founded the nongovernmental organization the Institute for State Effectiveness, in Washington, DC.

²³ Thomas F. Lynch III, “After ISIS: Fully Reappraising U.S. Policy in Afghanistan,” *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (Summer 2015), 123.

²⁴ See Jeffrey E. Stern, “This Former Johns Hopkins Professor Could Be Afghanistan’s Next President,” *New Republic*, March 27, 2014, available at <www.newrepublic.com/article/117150/ashraf-ghani-ahmadzai-interview-us-prof-afghan-presidents>; Kambaiz Rafi, “How Hamid Karzai Continues to Rule Afghanistan From Beyond the (Political) Grave,” *The Diplomat*, July 25, 2015, available at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/07/how-hamid-karzai-continues-to-rule-afghanistan-from-beyond-the-political-grave>; Margherita Stancati, “Afghan Deal Probe Tests New President,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 24, 2015, available at <www.wsj.com/articles/afghan-fuel-deal-probe-tests-new-president-1424829651>; David Lynch,

"Ghani Says Afghan Future Lies in Trade, Not Foreign Aid," *Bloomberg Politics*, May 4, 2015, available at <www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2015-05-04/afghanistan-s-ghani-says-a-tough-year-will-yield-stronger-nation>.

²⁵ John Campbell, "The State of Afghanistan and Prospects for the Future," remarks at the Brookings Institution, Washington, DC, August 4, 2015, 13–15.

²⁶ Most prominently, the relationship between Ambassador Karl W. Eikenberry and General Stanley A. McChrystal was less than fully harmonious. See Joshua Partlow, "Tensions Between Eikenberry, McChrystal Will Be Focus of Their Washington Visit," *Washington Times*, May 9, 2010, available at <www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/08/AR2010050803391.html>.

²⁷ Rod Nordland, "In Handling Barrage of Attacks, Afghan Forces Show Training Is Paying Off," *New York Times*, August 8, 2015, available at <www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/world/asia/in-handling-barrage-of-attacks-afghan-forces-show-training-is-paying-off.html>.

²⁸ Yaroslav Trofimov, "Taliban Advances But Scores No Strategic Wins After U.S. Pullout From Afghanistan," *Wall Street Journal*, August 17, 2015, available at <<http://search.proquest.com/docview/1707506394/full-text/AAD0614AE6984C03PQ/1?accountid=12686>>.

²⁹ Air power is a recurring theme with Afghan senior leaders when discussion turns to where allied support has not been adequate. The shortcomings focus on lack of close air support planes and helicopters, but extends to utility helicopters as well. See Rod Nordland, "U.S. Is Struggling in Its Effort to Build an Afghan Air Force," *New York Times*, September 26, 2015, available at <www.nytimes.com/2015/09/27/world/asia/us-is-struggling-in-its-effort-to-build-an-afghan-air-force.html?_r=0>.

³⁰ Personal communication with a number of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) senior leaders, including the Chief of Army Staff and Chief of Operations, Kabul, Afghanistan, July 2015.

³¹ Campbell, remarks at Brookings Institution.

³² *Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, 39.

³³ Concerns spiked after comments made by outgoing ISAF Joint Command Commander Lieutenant General Joseph Anderson in November 2014. See Jon Harper, "U.S. Commander: Afghan Casualties 'Not Sustainable,'" *Stars and Stripes*, November 5, 2014, available at <www.stripes.com/news/us-commander-afghan-casualties-not-sustainable-1.312364>.

³⁴ General John Campbell, statement to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, DC, February 12, 2015, available at <www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/15-13%20-%202-12-15.pdf>.

³⁵ James Mackenzie and Ralph Boulton,

"Afghan Forces Lose 4,000 a Month to Casualties, Desertion—U.S. General," Reuters, August 6, 2015, available at <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/08/06/afghanistan-military-idINKCN0QB26420150806>>.

³⁶ SIGAR, 98–99.

³⁷ Personal communication with author, April 2015. For Brookings Institution ongoing total of ANDSF casualties, see Ian Livingston and Michael E. O'Hanlon, "The Afghanistan Index," Brookings Institution, Washington, DC.

³⁸ Franz-Stefan Gady, "Afghan Forces Are Suffering Record Losses," *The Diplomat*, May 5, 2015, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/05/afghan-forces-are-suffering-record-losses/>>.

³⁹ SIGAR, 2–5.

⁴⁰ Wadsam (Afghan Business News Portal), "President Ghani's Serious Commitment to Combat Corruption," June 2, 2015, available at <<http://wadsam.com/afghan-business-news/president-ghanis-serious-commitment-to-combat-corruption-2132/>>.

⁴¹ SIGAR, 16.

⁴² Combined Security Transition Command–Afghanistan, *Command Brief* (slidepack), Kabul, Afghanistan, July 10, 2015.

⁴³ *Report on Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan*, 6.

⁴⁴ Jibrán Ahmad, "Taliban's Mullah Omar Died of Natural Causes in Afghanistan, Son Says," Reuters, September 11, 2015, available at <www.reuters.com/article/2015/09/14/us-pakistan-taliban-idUSKCN-0RE0RC20150914>; and "Afghan Taliban Leader Sends Envoy Abroad to Win Support, Unite Group," Reuters, September 11, 2015, available at <<http://in.reuters.com/article/2015/09/11/afghanistan-taliban-idINL-4N11G34K20150911>>.

⁴⁵ Anwar Iqbal, "IS Fighting Taliban in Afghanistan, Says U.S. Commander," *Dawn.com*, August 17, 2015, available at <www.dawn.com/news/1200933>.

⁴⁶ Campbell, Brookings Institution remarks. See also Jon Boone, "UN Report Detailing Taliban Fighter Deaths Warns of Force's Illicit Funding," *The Guardian*, November 17, 2013, available at <www.theguardian.com/world/2013/nov/17/un-report-taliban-fighter-deaths>.

⁴⁷ Campbell, Brookings Institution remarks.

⁴⁸ Amir Shah et al., "Pakistan Sees Progress After Hosting Afghan-Taliban Talks," *New York Times*, July 8, 2015, available at <www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/07/08/world/asia/ap-as-pakistan-afghanistan.html>.

⁴⁹ Ahmet Ali Naqvi, "Pakistan-Afghanistan Relations Post 2014: Impacts on Pakistan's Security," *Journal of Political Studies* 22, no. 1 (2015), 97, 211–212.

⁵⁰ Lauren McNally and Paul Bucala, *The Taliban Resurgent: Threats to Afghanistan's Security* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, March 2015), 17–20.

⁵¹ UN report A/70/359–S/2015/684, 5–7/17.

⁵² Kathryn Stoner, "Russia's 21st Century Interests in Afghanistan: Resetting the Bear Trap," *Asian Survey* 55, no. 2 (March/April 2015), 398–419.

⁵³ Andrew Small, "What Now for China's Afghanistan Strategy?" *The Diplomat*, September 1, 2015, available at <<http://thediplomat.com/2015/09/what-now-for-chinas-afghanistan-strategy/>>.

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⁵⁶ Artemy Kalinovsky, *Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 199–205.

⁵⁷ Stephen Hosmer, Konrad Kellen, and Brian Jenkins, *The Fall of South Vietnam: Statements by Vietnamese Military and Civilian Leaders* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, December 1978), 7.

⁵⁸ SIGAR, 79.

⁵⁹ Atlantic Council South Asia Center, *Afghanistan and U.S. Security* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council South Asia Center, October 2015), 2–6, available at <www.atlanticcouncil.org/publications/issue-briefs/afghanistan-and-us-security>.

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