Weighing the Cost of the BSA in the Domestic and Neighbourhood Contexts (Part II)

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As negotiations remain on-going for the US-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement, recent developments have yet to signal a significant shift in policy orientation regarding the post-2014 relationship between the United States and the Afghan state. As discussed in Part I of this series, US-Afghan Security Agreement: Competing Notions of Sovereignty the areas of contention in the BSA negotiations suggest that the United States has a very different understanding of an independent Afghanistan than the latter has for itself. I argued that the notion of sovereignty advanced by both were fundamentally at odds with one another.

Some of the major challenges discussed in Part I have dissipated in the months since publication, but new obstacles – both diplomatic and security-related – have emerged, dragging both the general US-Afghan relationship and any prospect of a successful BSA to a new low. In fact, US-Afghan relations hit an all time low in March after the DFIP/Bagram Prison crisis came to a head, allegations of civilian mistreatment at the hands of US Special Forces-sponsored militias prompted a near-immediate US withdrawal from some areas of Maidan Wardak, and President Karzai publically accused the US of colluding with the Taliban and negotiating without the Afghan government.

Though efforts on both sides have helped spark a recent thaw in diplomatic tensions and BSA talks appear to be once again on track, competing visions for a U.S. role in Afghanistan after the official end to the 13-year war continue to seriously threaten the success of the negotiations. After all, the US showed in Iraq that it was willing to draw lines in the sand regarding the status of forces in the country and negotiations between the two ultimately failed, prompting a complete US withdrawal. In Afghanistan, however, the stakes are higher and it will prove much more difficult for either nation to fully detach from the other. This article will consider the cost of the BSA from two perspectives. First, it will examine the potential impact a BSA failure would have on US-Afghan relations generally, the US-led drone war in Pakistan, Afghan security, and the future of U.S. aid to the country. It will also consider some of the ramifications a successful BSA would likely have on Afghanistan’s position in the region, particularly with respect to Iran and China. Ultimately, though a BSA has clear incentives for Afghan diplomatic relations with the US, domestic security, and future US aid prospects, the cost of such a partnership must be understood and calculated carefully.

**BSA Failure: A Diplomatic Lemon**

Even though officials from both the United States and Afghanistan have continually expressed confidence with regard to the Bilateral Security Agreement, the threat of failure is real. There are several stages at which the BSA could fail, from the negotiations between Ambassadors Warlick and Hakimi to the Loya Jirga (Grand Council), which President Karzai has made clear must support the BSA as a prerequisite to his signature. Though unlikely because Loya Jirga attendees are invited directly by the President, it is possible that the Loya Jirga could refuse to support the draft BSA. Thus, even if current challenges are overcome, the actual endorsement might trigger a failure.

A failure to reach and endorse the BSA would effectually throw a wrench into already tense diplomatic relations. In fact, it is doubtful that popular political will in either nation is supportive of an extended partnership like the one proposed in the BSA, even if leadership understands the value of the agreement. The average American is weary of nearly a decade and a half of war, frustrated at continued spending on Afghanistan when unemployment remains pervasive and
domestic spending has been forcibly curtailed by Congressional failure to reach spending agreements, and a general lack of what they consider visible results in Afghanistan. Similarly, conversations with Afghans repeatedly reveal a general disdain towards the American presence, a presence they claim continually undermines security objectives by intimidating and mistreating local populations and that provides a simple rallying point for insurgent groups claiming to fight “foreign occupiers.”

Thus, a BSA failure would solidify the terse attitudes of both countries and mutual suspicion into formal political outlets. In the best of circumstances, an Afghan rejection of the agreement would leave American policy makers frustrated; in the worst, it would prompt serious re-examination of other policies towards Afghanistan. And, though many Afghans would like to see a complete US withdrawal post-2014, failure would certainly draw criticism from many other Afghan policymakers and analysts who genuinely view the agreement as the cornerstone of US commitment in the country long-term.

BSA Failure and the Contradictions of Territorial Integrity

Throughout the BSA negotiation process, notions of sovereignty have been repeatedly trumpeted as the cornerstone of any post 2014 partnership between the Afghan government and the United States. However, as discussed in Part I, the two countries appear to have differing ideas of what constitutes a sovereign Afghanistan. The Afghan government has made it clear that it fully expects complete legal, administrative, and territorial sovereignty over both citizens and any foreign military mentors. The US, on the other hand, has been adamant that any residual troop presence will function to support Afghan state sovereignty and stability, but must enjoy immunity from Afghan law.

The truth of the matter is that traditional Westphalian concepts of sovereignty are out-dated in the globalized 21st century, and Afghan sovereignty is no exception. Political and military leaders in both countries should move beyond the simplistic notions that the BSA will undermine Afghan independence, particularly with respect to territorial integrity. The oft-alluded to but rarely spoken axiom is that the Afghan state and territory are under both direct and indirect threats from Pakistan and ISI-sponsored insurgent groups who operate in Afghanistan. The US drone war is extremely unpopular, and the legal and ethical dilemmas such a campaign presents are numerous. Such questions, however, are outside the scope of this paper. What matters is the real politick benefit reaped by both countries that would continue if the BSA designates a base and airspace permissions for US drone operations in Eastern Afghanistan.

Drone missions have been a linchpin of the Obama administration’s counterterrorism strategy, one that is unlikely to change during Obama’s second term. Seen by military leaders as a critical innovation of the War on Terror, drones have given US defence officials the opportunity to regularly broadcast successful assassinations of Taliban and Al Qaeda commanders in the challenging terrain of Pakistan. In fact, bases from whence the US can continue to launch drones and run intelligence collection missions are probably one of the strongest assets the Afghan government has at the negotiating table to elicit concessions or commitments in other areas.

Moreover, the US and NATO presence in the east as well as the abundance of US predator drones pointed at Pakistani frontier regions probably serves as a deterrent from formal intervention in Afghanistan by the Pakistani military. Though US commitment to military
support Afghan borders is not clearly defined, the current structure of US-Afghan partnership leaves at least the potential for tactical and operational support to defensive operations should Pakistani move into border territories along the ever-contentious Durand Line. The recent skirmishes along the border in Goshta district in Nangarhar province illustrate this to some extent. The Afghan National Security Forces have performed well in the clashes seen so far; however, the Pakistani military is clearly testing both the diplomatic and military parameters of both the Afghan government and the NATO forces. Simply put, if the Pakistani military was truly serious about encroaching on the boarder – or trying to take the district – their military presence along the Goshta border would likely be much bigger than it is currently. Though still a serious threat, Pakistani military operations in the Nangarhari border areas are more of a stick by which the government can test both the capability and willingness of the Kabul government to engage alone, as well as the US and ISAF commitment to aiding Afghanistan should Islamabad attempt to push through the border.

Despite the ANSF’s commendable performance – generally and in response to Pakistani ambition at the border – a BSA failure and US withdrawal would negatively impact the ANSF’s ability to defend future offensives against its borders. The BSA is, after all, the outline and formal commitment to the extended provision of essential equipment such as helicopters, planes, vehicles, and light artillery necessary to prevail in future border engagements should they occur. This again highlights the manner in which a successful BSA could stand to help preserve Afghan territorial integrity in the long run.

**General Domestic Afghan Security**

The implications of the BSA on general domestic Afghan security are fairly obvious, but are worth a pause to mention. Diplomats and defence officials have made it exceedingly clear that the main objective for any residual US forces designated in the Bilateral Security Agreement would be to continue to train and mentor the ANSF. This would undoubtedly help improve overall institutional and operational capacity and hence security, though its unlikely that such operations would give the kind of boost Hagel, Dunford, and the Obama Administration continually trumpet. The relationship between ISAF and ANSF leadership is obviously varied and complicated, but the friction – and sometimes outright disdain – between the various security institutions is apparent to anyone working with both Afghan and international groups for a given task.

This is not to discount the contribution of US mentors, because they have significantly contributed to shaping the ANSF into the force it is today. However, it is not clear at this point how much more the relatively small post-14 projected troop numbers can impact the force. This is especially true when factoring in the on-going crisis of trust and mitigating measures taken to help neutralize the insider threat, which have seen international forces amend, and in some cases, limit contact and training opportunities at the lowest levels of the police and military where most of the day-to-day combat engagements take place.

A BSA failure therefore would not be ideal for general domestic security because it would effectually halt on-going training at both the Kabul and lower levels of the security institutions. However, it is not clear whether security losses caused by the absence of mentors would outweigh the potential gains. As mentioned previously, the presence of Coalition Forces has been a main rallying point for the recruitment of militants throughout the war; thus, it is also
likely that a BSA failure and subsequent full withdrawal would encourage many militants to lay down their weapons and join Afghan-led reconciliation processes.

**BSA and Aid Dependency**

Approximately ninety per cent of the Afghan economy is linked to foreign aid in one way or another, with the United States as the largest provider of aid. As the security transition continues, so will Afghanistan’s economic transition. Though both are on-going processes, the economic transition is arguably more critical for Afghanistan’s long-term stability and prosperity.

The military and USAID spending drawdown is already apparent in Kabul and other areas of the country. For the last decade aid and construction contracts as well as the high salaries offered by NGOs, construction and logistics companies, and development contractors have severely over-inflated the market value for domestic skill sets and the provision of services. For example, individuals with limited or no post-secondary education and experience routinely insist on salaries that far exceed salary ranges for comparable skills in western countries like the United States or the UK and where cost of living is much higher. As the economy continues to shift away from aid and back towards domestic generated capital, salaries will have to retract back to fit the local scale – a hard pill to swallow for many. Indeed, there are many instances in Kabul where service providers are increasing their prices to try and account for the retracting market and make up for forecasted losses. Obviously this is not sustainable.

The BSA – or its failure – will impact the economic transition. USAID and US-based institutional donors will definitely continue to reduce spending in Afghanistan amidst their own domestic budget crises and shifting foreign policy priorities. In addition, future spending is not necessarily explicitly tied to the success of the BSA. However, to believe that a BSA failure would not further result weaker aid commitment to Afghanistan in the coming years would be grossly naive. Afghanistan has begun to lay the ground work for a successful economic transition away from an aid-based economy through gas and mineral exploration and courting international corporations with a vested interest in Afghan human and resource capital. In addition, the country now has a solid foundation of established entrepreneurs and an ambitious youth willing and able to carve out their own success through entrepreneurship and technology. Yet in order to ensure that economic transition is stable, successful, and future driven it must also exercise caution and oversight to ensure it is not thwarted by corruption. The BSA therefore will keep USAID and institutional donor commitments at higher levels in over the next 10-20 years, thus creating more wiggle room for the economic transition to take root and thrive.

**BSA Cost in the South Asian Context**

As we have seen, there are clear incentives for both the US and Afghanistan to sign the BSA. Both stand to gain in different ways, either through regional access, security and aid gains, or general diplomatic affluence on the world stage. Yet there are some very real costs that signing and upholding a BSA with the United States could have for Afghanistan in the regional context. Though impossible to say with certainty whether the benefits reaped by signing the agreement will outweigh the regional costs over the next decade or more, they should nonetheless be considered very carefully.
Iran has been perhaps the most vehement opponent to any US presence in the region. Though there is common ground – such as the combat of narcotics cultivation and trafficking – where Iran and the United States should have worked together in Afghanistan, icy relations between the two have generated nothing but criticism for one another throughout the nearly twelve-year war. In fact, as news broke of the CIA cash-laden duffle bag deliveries to the presidential palace in recent weeks, information also emerged proving that Iran had made similar cash-in-hand deliveries to Karzai for years, but cut off such contributions in direct response to Karzai’s signature on the Strategic Partnership Agreement that paved the way for the BSA negotiations in May 2012.

Iran’s direct withdrawal of informal cash flows to Afghanistan are a clear signal that it is also willing to draw lines in the sand regarding a permanent US presence in the country. Iran perceives – and rightly so – the provision of bases to the US on Afghan soil as a direct threat against its own territory and regime. Iranian rhetoric routinely places the US at the top of its enemies list, and has repeatedly shown its willingness to covert operations to undermine US efforts in the country. For example, it is widely recognized throughout Afghanistan that Iranian intelligence and military institutions fund, arm, and train insurgent groups who operate in western Afghanistan provinces such as Herat and Nimroz. Combat operations in the west commonly uncover such links. In addition, the insider attack perpetrated by an Iranian-born woman at the Ministry of Interior compound in Kabul on 24 December 2012 also uncovered links to Iranian security institutions.

Clearly Iran is willing to use any and all political and social capital it can to undermine US efforts in Afghanistan. Unfortunately for Afghanistan, this often means its neighbour to the west is more of a peace spoiler than a peace broker. A successful US-Afghan BSA will only magnify these efforts and the fact that millions of Afghan refugees have spent time in Iran over the last several decades means that Tehran has significant influence in Afghanistan.

Though it has been less aggressive, China also strongly opposes any long-term US presence in Afghanistan. This is primarily because China has emerged out of the last two decades as a major, global economic and security powerhouse. It currently stands as one of the if not the leading nation in the eastern hemisphere, and has found itself as the major political and economic competition for the United States. Still, China has been cautiously supportive of the US efforts in Afghanistan throughout the last decade. This is to say that it has been largely unwilling to participate in the Coalition or to criticise the Taliban too harshly while also withholding overt criticism for the US/NATO effort in Afghanistan. As I discussed previously, this is mostly likely for pragmatic reasons – concern over extremism in Xinjiang and the knowledge that Beijing will have to work with whatever regime proves victorious in Kabul for years beyond the current war.

China’s pragmatism, however, will have its limits. Similarly to Iran, China is also likely to interpret a BSA and a long term US presence in Afghanistan – complete with bases for reconnaissance and droning missions – as a direct threat to its own national security interests. China has continually insisted that western powers should leave Asia to work within itself and deal with Asian countries on equal footing and with mutual respect. If the BSA is to pass, the

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repercussions for Afghanistan from China will differ from those shown by Iran. China is not likely to venture down the rabbit hole of arming the insurgents or other pseudo-military efforts to undermine the US presence. Instead, China’s opposition to such a strong and lasting partnership between Afghanistan and the US will be felt economically. China has been keen to invest and develop in private sector enterprise, already having spent about $3 billion USD on rights to the Aynak copper mines in Logar province and $700 million USD in oil and gas exploration rights. Though these deals are already made, a BSA could prevent future such deals that present lucrative opportunities for the economic transition. In this sense, the ramifications of a BSA for Afghan relations with China are not wholly unlike the loss of cash payments made by Iran.

Conclusion

The US-Afghan Bilateral Security Agreement is a controversial document, and at this moment, it remains to be seen whether it will come to fruition for a host of reasons discussed above and in the first paper in this series. However, negotiations remain on-going and many believe it possible to draft a document that proves mutually beneficial to both countries. Though tensions remain between the United States and Afghanistan, and views regarding security, rule of law, and sovereignty often appear at odds with one another, the nearly twelve years of conflict has forged a sort of begrudging brotherhood. When examining the mutual benefit that stands to be gained by both countries upon signing the BSA, it seems clear that Afghanistan and the United States should find a way to make the BSA work. However, simply looking at the diplomatic, security, and aid gains a BSA can have from the US is too narrow. Afghanistan must also navigate its place in the region as a developing South Asian nation in a period of both security and economic transition. In this sense, the potential costs of a BSA in terms of repercussions from Iran and China are also of critical import.

At the end of the day it is impossible to adequately weigh and assess all possible gains and costs of the BSA to determine for certain whether it is in Afghanistan’s best interest to sign such a document. As it stands, it appears that the United States stands primarily to gain from a success and lose from a fail; for Afghanistan, it is not so clear-cut. Afghan political and military leaders need to consider whether the gains in security and aid will outweigh any potential spoiler behaviour from Iran and China, and also consider whether any losses from a BSA failure might be compensated for by other mechanisms in the region. Only then will it be in the best position to make a truly informed decision on the Bilateral Security Agreement.