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Righting the Wrong Smart Power in Afghanistan ^[1]

New York Times columnist David Brooks recently wrote a piece on “Smart Power Setback,” harshly criticizing the international aid system and the way it has operated in Afghanistan over the past decade. Drawing on the recent U.S. Congressional reports on aid effectiveness in Afghanistan, he points out a few major achievements in the areas of education and healthcare in the country, but argues “the influx of aid has, in many cases, created dependency, fed corruption, contributed to insecurity and undermined the host government’s capacity to oversee sustainable programs.”

These unintended consequences of pumping large amounts of aid resources into Afghanistan could have been avoided, if only Afghanistan’s nation-partners had listened to the Afghan people. Conference after conference since 2002, President Hamid Karzai has appealed to the international community to help build capacity in the country’s post-war state institutions and to channel their aid resources through these institutions overtime. It is clear that as Afghanistan’s nascent state institutions gradually gained the necessary capacity, they would be able to absorb international aid, increasingly designing and implementing aid programs on their own. This continues to be overwhelmingly demanded by the Afghan people, who want to see their government’s capacity grow daily in order to deliver on their basic expectations now and on the long run.

Indeed, it is commonsense that unless Afghans stand on their own to lead and drive the rebuilding and development of their country, the donor community, for a variety of reasons and considerations, will eventually leave Afghanistan. U.S. President Barack Obama signaled this in his recent speech when he announced the phased withdrawal of 30,000 U.S. forces from Afghanistan by the end of 2012, stating, “We won’t try to make Afghanistan a perfect place. We will not police its streets or patrol its mountains indefinitely. That is the responsibility of the Afghan government...” As a matter of fact, because Afghans knew that such announcements were going to be made sooner or later, they have been asking, as early as 2002, for an accelerated *afghanization* of the reconstruction and stabilization of Afghanistan so that Afghans could gain the capacity they need to govern and defend their country against internal and external security threats.

In an Op-Ed, which the *Washington Times* published on July 20, 2006, I lamented a lack of both aid resources for and a firm commitment by the donor community to state-building in Afghanistan. I noted that between 2001 and 2005 the basic institutions of centralized government were established in Afghanistan. But law enforcement institutions, which constitute the face of any government, had been neglected from the beginning. Judicial and police reforms—reforms that should have been the foundation on which other state institutions were built—were not implemented and were shelved indefinitely, due to a lack of resources. Consequently, I concluded that a security vacuum had widened in areas where state institutions were either absent or too weak to protect people, particularly in the south and

east—areas that had seen little or no assistance until 2005.

From 2005 onward, the donor community has continued to replace, but not build, Afghan capacity. English speaking Afghan professionals, who must be retained in or absorbed into the government, have been lured away by the high salaries of the donor-related parallel organizations. For instance, if an Afghan civil engineer were earning \$150 a month, working with the government, he would immediately quit that job to take a cook's or driver's job with such parallel structures as private contractors, UN agencies, and NGOs, which could pay him ten times as much, at least \$800 a month. Consequently, rather than helping Afghanistan regain its lost brain, the donor community has contributed to draining the government of its few competent professionals.

No doubt that a decade on since international reengagement in Afghanistan, the government remains either weak or absent in much of Afghanistan, simply because the donor community have continued to run their own mini-states in the country. And when they decide to leave the country, their ad hoc parallel structures—which have bypassed and thus robbed the Afghan government of scarce resources for state-building for the past decade—would evaporate, leaving a gap in state failure as wide as when the international community stumbled upon in 2001, immediately after the fall of the Taliban.

Hence, there is no way forward in Afghanistan, unless the international community rethinks the way they have operated in the country so far. To avoid failure and more of the same, they must exploit the strategic opportunity of capitalizing on the many lessons they have learned thus far to replace the “Afghan face” with the “Afghan hands” on getting the job done henceforth. By now, there should be no excuse of not knowing Afghanistan or how to work there effectively. The largest donors have been in Afghanistan for the past ten years, and must have built the institutional memory they need to work in full concert with the government and people of Afghanistan in order to implement the priorities of the Afghanistan National Development Strategy, which were presented to the international community in last year's Kabul conference.

At the same time, the transition to Afghan responsibility, currently underway, must be conditions-based since much remains to be accomplished, because of the reasons discussed above, to ensure that Afghanistan firmly stands on its own. When the country is on a sustainable path towards recovery, the sacrifices and memories of so many people, including NATO and Afghan forces that have fought and fallen together to secure Afghanistan, will be honored. And the Afghan history will record forever the gratitude of the Afghan people to their nation-partners for doing the right thing in Afghanistan.

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