The Trillion Dollar War

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CHAPTER TWO

The Marshall Plan 2.0

Afghanistan

To most people in the outside world, Afghanistan was an unfamiliar country prior to the terrorist attacks against the United States on 11 September 2001 (9/11). The image of the World Trade Center in New York City being hit by airplanes remains a vivid memory for the author, who was in middle school and doing homework before dinner on that fateful day. His family was living as refugees in Peshawar, Pakistan, at the time and had a guest over from Afghanistan when the local Pakistani news channels suddenly shifted to a live CNN (Cable News Network) broadcast, which was unusual, that showed planes crashing into the towers.1

The author did not understand what exactly was happening, but he knew something critical was occurring in the United States, where two of his uncles lived with their families in Boston, Massachusetts. When the author’s father returned from work, he turned on the old radio to listen to BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) Pashto, the primary source of news for most Afghan refugees who were not fully fluent in the local Pakistani language.2 As days passed, reports emerged about al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden’s in-

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volvement in the attacks as well as the Taliban’s complicity.3

The author’s interest in how the United States would retaliate against bin Laden and the Taliban was piqued. His father had often discussed that if the Taliban were removed from power in Afghanistan, the family might return to Kabul and start a new life there. They would no longer be forced to live as *muhajir*, refugees in a foreign country.4

On 7 October 2001, the United States embarked on its longest war in history by launching Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in Afghanistan. President George W. Bush uttered the following words in his address to the nation: “On my orders, the United States military has begun strikes against Al Qaida [sic] terrorist training camps and military installations of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan.”5 With the full assistance of the British armed forces, the U.S. military initiated a bombing campaign in Afghanistan, officially launching America’s operation against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.6

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4 *Muhajir* is an Arabic term for refugees. The word was widely used by Pakistanis to refer to refugees who had fled wars in Afghanistan and settled in various cities in Pakistan. The word had a demeaning connotation associated with it, highlighting the lower status of an individual in a society.
CHAPTER TWO

For the first time in its history, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) invoked Article 5, committing its members to stand with the United States in its response to the 9/11 attacks.\(^7\) Canada, Australia, Germany, and France pledged their full support in the fight. The goal of OEF was outlined by Bush in his address to the nation: to crush the Taliban, which had seized control of Afghanistan, and to wipe out al-Qaeda.\(^8\) After 20 years, the war in Afghanistan has taken its toll at a cost of nearly $1 trillion (USD), 3,594 U.S. troops killed, and more than 20,000 injured.\(^9\) Four U.S. presidents—George W. Bush, Barack H. Obama, Donald J. Trump, and Joseph R. Biden Jr.—have all engaged in this war with distinct approaches to untangle a complex web

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8 Al-Qaeda was the group that planned the 9/11 attacks and successfully executed it using 19 terrorists, most of whom were citizens of Saudi Arabia. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States* (Washington, DC: National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004).

9 Fred Kaplan, “The War in Afghanistan Was Doomed from the Start,” *Slate* (blog), 9 December 2019. Based on the author’s research, the *direct cost* of the war is approximately $1 trillion. The *indirect cost* of the war, which includes interest on the amount borrowed for the war in Afghanistan as well as veterans’ care until 2050, is about another $1 trillion. If the indirect cost is included in the analysis, the total cost of the war is closer to $2 trillion. However, the focus here is on the direct cost of the war and the $1 trillion figure will be used throughout as a result. For more information, see “Costs of War,” Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, August 2021.
of challenges and to help develop the impoverished nation. This chapter and chapter 3 discuss Bush’s predicament with the war in Afghanistan. He began the fight in the hopes of improving homeland security and bringing peace and prosperity to Afghanistan but fell short of achieving that goal by the time he left office in 2009. Chapter 4 extensively examines Obama’s approach to the war and nation-building efforts in Afghanistan. Chapter 5 outlines the human toll and the monetary cost of the war during the last two decades. Finally, chapter 6 deliberates on Trump and Biden’s approach to Afghanistan and their efforts to strike a peace deal with the Taliban.

The Bush Doctrine
In his memoir, Decision Points, President Bush devotes an entire chapter to Afghanistan and his administration’s strategy for the war and nation-building efforts there. He writes, “Twelve days after I announced the start of the war, the first of the Special Forces teams finally touched down.” Within days, almost all of the major cities under Taliban rule fell to Coalition forces, including the capital of Kabul. The Afghan people were liberated from the brutality of the Taliban regime. Women came out of their homes without any fear, men shaved their beards, children flew kites or played soc-

11 Bush, Decision Points, 170.
cer, and everyone welcomed the foreign forces led by the United States through the streets of Mazari Sharif, Herat, Kabul, and many other cities. They were considered liberators who came to save them from the cruelty of the Taliban.\textsuperscript{13}

The stronghold of Kandahar was the only city where the Taliban resisted and made an offer to discuss delivering Osama bin Laden to a third country for trial if the United States provided evidence of his involvement in the 9/11 attacks.\textsuperscript{14} The White House rejected the offer. After a full airstrike campaign, the Taliban gave up Kandahar on 7 December 2001, two months after OEF began.\textsuperscript{15}

One of the strongest elements of Bush’s initial war campaign was the creation of a united international Coalition against the war on terrorism. In his book, Bush writes:

\textit{We would not act alone.} [U.S. secretary of state] Colin Powell had done an impressive job rallying countries to our coalition. Some, such as Great Britain and Australia, offered to deploy forces. Others, including Japan and South Korea, pledged humanitarian aid and logistical support. South Korea later sent troops. Key Arab partners, such as Jordan and Saudi Ara-


Most NATO nations also offered troops for the initial war effort, including Germany, Turkey, Italy, and the Netherlands.¹⁷

Now that Afghanistan was liberated from the Taliban and its central government—if that even existed—had collapsed, the United States was put in the position to revive a country destroyed by three decades of internal war and marred by extreme poverty.¹⁸ The level of poverty and destruction came as a surprise to most in Washington, DC.¹⁹ Most watched from afar as, during the civil war and the Taliban reign that ensued, the Afghan economy came to a standstill and access to basic services was extremely limited. Afghans had become overly reliant on neighboring countries for basic necessities, and they depended on food aid delivered by humanitarian agencies. The country’s institutions, infrastructure, roads, bridges, hospitals, and schools had all but been destroyed during these tumultuous years of war.²⁰ To establish a governing structure, the United Nations (UN) hosted the Bonn Conference in Germany

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¹⁶ Bush, Decision Points, 164.
¹⁹ Perry and Kassing, Toppling the Taliban.
in December 2001.\textsuperscript{21} A diverse group of Afghans were invited to this conference, including the Northern Alliance, which was made up of Tajiks, Uzbeks, and other ethnic minorities who had some control over much of the country as the Taliban fled.\textsuperscript{22} The Rome group was represented by a delegation of the former king of Afghanistan, Mohammad Zahir Shah, while the Peshawar group was led by Afghan refugees living in Pakistan.\textsuperscript{23} The UN played a key role in building consensus among these groups of Afghans on certain measures about the future government of their country. After nine days of deliberation, the participants agreed on an ambitious three-year political and administrative plan and chose Hamid Karzai as chairman of an interim authority for six months. Karzai was tasked to convene a \textit{loya jirga}

\textsuperscript{21} Mark Fields and Ramsha Ahmed, \textit{A Review of the 2001 Bonn Conference and Application to the Road Ahead in Afghanistan} (Washington, DC: Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University, 2011); and “Security Council Endorses Afghanistan Agreement on Interim Arrangements Signed Yesterday in Bonn, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 1383,” press release, United Nations Security Council, 12 June 2001. UNSCR 1383 states that the UN is “reaffirming its strong commitment to the sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity and national unity of Afghanistan; Stressing the inalienable right of the Afghan people themselves freely to determine their own political future; Determined to help the people of Afghanistan to bring to an end the tragic conflicts in Afghanistan and promote national reconciliation, lasting peace, stability and respect for human rights, as well as to cooperate with the international community to put an end to the use of Afghanistan as a base for terrorism.”


\textsuperscript{23} Tom Heneghan, “Afghans Get Down to Details in UN Talks,” Reuters, 28 November 2001.
(grand council) that would then select a transitional government, which in turn would draft a new constitution and hold free and fair elections in the next two years.\textsuperscript{24}

Additionally, the participants of the Bonn Conference requested that the United States make a long-term commitment to Afghanistan in the form of strategic partnership and maintain a military force in the country beyond 2014. The agreement also requested U.S. funding of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) through 2015. As part of this pact, the UN authorized the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to provide security support to Afghans, and the United Kingdom agreed to lead the force initially. ISAF was one of the largest coalitions in history, with more than 130,000 troops from 51 NATO and partner nations operating in Afghanistan to maintain security.\textsuperscript{25}

As soon as the interim government was established and Karzai was sworn in as its head, the author’s father decided that it was time for the family to return to Kabul. No one would call them \textit{muhajir} again. It was a new beginning for all Afghans, who now had access to the lives that they could never have had as refugees. In the spring of 2002, the author’s family hired a truck from Peshawar to move them back to Kabul. The journey to the Tor-Kham border was easy and full of joy and laughter. After crossing the border into Afghanistan, the sheer destruction of the roads, buildings, and houses was shocking. The truck that had begun the 10-hour

\textsuperscript{24} Fields and Ahmed, \textit{A Review of the 2001 Bonn Conference and Application to the Road Ahead in Afghanistan}.

journey from Pakistan with a smooth ride now wobbled like a pendulum as it made its way across massive craters in the road. Men, women, and children wore haunted expressions, with most looking malnourished and physically worn (figure 11). Signs of war were visible everywhere—houses were razed to the ground, broken and abandoned tanks sat on the sides of the road, and bullet holes raked across metal rooftops (figure 12).

The author’s family home in Kabul had been destroyed during the war, so they stayed at their grandparents’ house, as the grandparents were living in the United States at the time. The house was still erect but visibly battered. The windows, doors, and any wooden material used in the house had been broken or stolen. Even the wires inside the concrete walls had been

Figure 11. More than 400 Afghan refugee children wait at the Aschiana school in Kabul for clothing and school supplies
ripped out. People were selling copper wire to make a living. Bullet holes riddled the building. It required a lot of effort to make the house livable again—it needed new windows, cement on the walls to cover the bullet holes, new wiring, paint, trash removal, and, most importantly, a new well because a severe drought during the last decade had dried out the previous one.

This repatriation story mirrors those of millions of Afghans who took the same journey following the toppling of the Taliban regime. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), between 2001 and 2004 more than 3.5 million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan and 2.3 million living in Iran returned to their home country.26 To help with the process, the UN paid each family returning from Pakistan

or Iran a certain amount of money to cover transportation costs. This major influx of refugees caught UN agencies tasked with assisting in their resettlement by surprise. In one report, they indicate that their estimated projection for the repatriation of Afghans was surpassed by 300 percentage points. The largest and most complex operation ever undertaken by UNHCR had previously been in Africa, where 1.7 million Mozambicans returned from six neighboring countries during a four-year period (1992–96). The Afghan operation was three times larger and more complex than that. Figure 13 illustrates the arrival trends of refugees from 2002 to 2008.

This massive influx from voluntary repatriation was a sign of desperation from most Afghans living in refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran. They just wanted to return to their home country and build a simple life like their parents and grandparents had before them. They no longer wanted to be called muhijir in Pakistan or Afghan kaseef (dirty Afghan) in Iran.

President Bush writes in his book that

over time, the thrill of liberation gave way to the daunting task of helping the Afghans rebuild—or, more accurately, build from scratch. Afghanistan in 2001 was the world’s third poorest country. Less than 10 percent of the population had access to health care. Four out of every five

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women were illiterate. While Afghanistan’s land area and population were similar to those of Texas, its annual economic output was comparable to that of Billings, Montana. Life expectancy was a bleak forty-six years.\textsuperscript{29}

Now that Afghanistan had been liberated, a central government established, and security maintained through ISAF, the second most daunting challenge for the Bush administration was to help rebuild the war-

\textsuperscript{29} Bush, \textit{Decision Points}, 174.
torn country. The term *rebuild* is an understatement considering the task ahead for all parties involved. The country’s security forces—both police and military—were nonexistent. Afghanistan had a subsistence-level economy with no major trade or industrial production activities. Just like post-World War II Germany, Afghanistan’s infrastructure lay in shambles with roads destroyed, bridges collapsed, canals dried up, and power grids torn apart. Government institutions were barely capable of providing minimal public services, and the education system for boys and girls lacked school supplies, textbooks, teachers, and classrooms. The challenge ahead was as formidable as it was in Europe after World War II, and it needed a strong commitment from the international community. Most importantly, it required a roadmap with concrete sets of deliverables backed by strong financial support by an international coalition led by the United States.

During one of their presidential election debates in 2000, then-governor of Texas George W. Bush and U.S. vice president Albert A. “Al” Gore Jr. debated the possibility of sending U.S. troops for nation-building efforts in any part of the world.30 Bush came out strongly against this idea of using “our troops as nation builders.” However, he later wrote in his memoir that

> after 9/11, I changed my mind. Afghanistan was the ultimate nation-building mission. We had liberated the country from a primitive dictatorship, and we had a moral obligation to leave behind some-

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thing better. We also had a strategic interest in helping the Afghan people build a free society. . . . A democratic Afghanistan would be a hopeful alternative to the vision of the extremists. 31

Bush’s strategy for Afghanistan was threefold:
1. To liberate Afghanistan from the Taliban and fight the remnants of al-Qaeda in that country.
2. To help Afghanistan become a prosperous country in the region and serve as an example for other nations to see the strategic benefits of siding with the United States and the West. As part of this nation-building effort, the goal was also to strengthen the democratic institutions in Afghanistan and propagate the principles of democracy and market economy in the country.
3. To sell this dual-focused strategy of war and development in Afghanistan to those in Washington, DC. 32

This strategy had to have a domestic front to answer the question of why the United States should spend so much money in Afghanistan. The answer to

31 Bush, Decision Points, 174.
this question lies in the last pillar of Bush’s strategy for Afghanistan: to fight the enemy who were thousands of kilometers ashore in Afghanistan and help build a prosperous democratic future for Afghans to prevent the country from becoming a breeding ground for terrorists who could strike the United States again.\(^\text{33}\)

**The Nation-Building Strategy, 2002–8**

Following the initial U.S. airstrikes on the Taliban, which freed Afghanistan from their brutal regime and paved the way for the Northern Alliance to take control of the liberated cities, the Bush administration felt emboldened by this quick payoff. Twelve days after the first bombardments, American forces were on the ground in Afghanistan, and within 102 days of the 9/11 attacks, the United States had expelled the Taliban from the country and presumably dissipated al-Qaeda.\(^\text{34}\) Afghanistan now had a new leader who was “forty-four years old with sharp features and a salt-and-pepper beard . . . [and] wore a shimmering green cape over his gray tunic, along with a pointed cap made of goatskin.”\(^\text{35}\) Most importantly, the United States and international forces were hailed as liberators and welcomed by the majority of Afghans—a reaction that few expected. According to an Asia Foundation survey

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\(^\text{33}\) George W. Bush, “President Bush Discusses Progress in Afghanistan, Global War on Terror” (speech, Mayflower Hotel, Washington, DC, 15 February 2007).


from 2004, roughly two-thirds of Afghans surveyed were in favor of the United States (65 percent) and the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan (67 percent). In the United States, support for going to war in Afghanistan was significantly positive as well, with 87 percent of Americans in support in October 2001.

As a backdrop to this considerable support in the United States and abroad, the Bush administration took on the task of nation-building in Afghanistan. The following section focuses on these nation-building efforts and outlines the achievements, failures, and consequences of those interventions.

On 18 April 2002, seven months after the war in Afghanistan was announced, President Bush spoke before cadets at the Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and outlined America’s role in a post-Taliban Afghanistan. Bush announced that military force alone could not bring “true peace” to Afghanistan unless the war-ravaged country reconstructed its roads, health care system, schools, and businesses, just as Europe and Japan did after World War II.

In this speech, the president insisted that the United States was ready to lead an international effort in Afghanistan. He repeatedly invoked the name of U.S. Army general George C. Marshall, who graduated from VMI in 1901, served as U.S. president Harry S. Truman’s secretary of state after World War II, and became

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37 Chris Good, “When and Why Did Americans Turn against the War in Afghanistan?,” Atlantic, 22 June 2011.
38 George W. Bush, “President Outlines War Effort” (speech, Virginia Military Institute, Lexington, VA, 17 April 2002).
the chief architect of the European Recovery Program, more commonly known as the Marshall Plan.

“By helping to build an Afghanistan that is free from this evil and is a better place in which to live, we are working in the best traditions of George Marshall,” Bush claimed. “Marshall knew that our military victory against enemies in World War II had to be followed by a moral victory that resulted in better lives for individual human beings.”

Indulging in some inspiration from Marshall, Bush’s heart was in the right place for Afghanistan and the Afghan people. His vision, outlined in this speech, is what Afghanistan needed at that moment. It was the much-needed remedy for a war-torn nation. While the intentions of the U.S. government were noble, however, the question is whether the strategy panned out on the ground in Afghanistan as planned.

When the author’s family returned to Afghanistan in 2002, his father took the author to the Ministry of Education in downtown Kabul. The route was lined with broken buildings and abandoned homes in a visibly deserted city (figure 14). The trip to the Ministry of Education was necessary to transfer the author’s academic credentials from the Pakistani school, which he had previously attended, to the Afghan educational system.

39 Bush elaborated further, “We know that true peace will only be achieved when we give the Afghan people the means to achieve their own aspirations. Peace will be achieved by helping Afghanistan develop its own stable government. Peace will be achieved by helping Afghanistan train and develop its own national army. And peace will be achieved through an education system for boys and girls which works.” James Dao, “A Nation Challenged: The President; Bush Sets Role for U.S. in Afghan Rebuilding,” *New York Times*, 18 April 2002.
They entered the administrative building with all the necessary certificates and other supporting documents to prove the author’s grade level in Pakistan, assuming that it would not be an issue to register in an Afghan school in the same grade. They were wrong. The man sitting behind the desk with a long dark beard and a turban refused to accept the papers. He insisted that the author be enrolled in a lower grade. The author’s father realized that the Talib-like gentleman behind the desk was hinting at some sort of *shereni* (bribe). The author was dismissed to wait for his father outside. When he joined the author a few minutes later, he said that the gentleman had promised to sign the papers. The next day, the author’s father handed him 500,000 Afghani, which was equivalent to about $10 (USD), and was told to go back to the Ministry of Education and

![Afghan children line up to enter the Rukhshana School in Kabul, Afghanistan](source: official Department of Defense photo.)

They entered the administrative building with all the necessary certificates and other supporting documents to prove the author’s grade level in Pakistan, assuming that it would not be an issue to register in an Afghan school in the same grade. They were wrong. The man sitting behind the desk with a long dark beard and a turban refused to accept the papers. He insisted that the author be enrolled in a lower grade. The author’s father realized that the Talib-like gentleman behind the desk was hinting at some sort of *shereni* (bribe). The author was dismissed to wait for his father outside. When he joined the author a few minutes later, he said that the gentleman had promised to sign the papers. The next day, the author’s father handed him 500,000 Afghani, which was equivalent to about $10 (USD), and was told to go back to the Ministry of Education and
give the money to that gentleman discretely. He had the enrollment papers signed in his top drawer and requested the shereni. Though only one of thousands of similar personal stories, this story highlights the fact that corruption was endemic in Afghan institutions even in the early days of U.S. involvement. Even though it was 2002, the author had to bribe his way into a school, which should be every person’s legitimate right.

On the first day in class, the students sat on a bare concrete floor because there were no desks or chairs. The classroom did have a roof and a blackboard with a small piece of chalk laying to the side. Due to a lack of teachers, one person would teach multiple subjects. After a few months, new desks and chairs were brought into the school. The building was renovated, classrooms painted, and new teachers hired, including female teachers. Newly published textbooks were brought in and distributed among the students. After the renovation was completed, a few government officials and foreigners came in to inaugurate the restoration of the school. The plaque near the entrance of the school bore the flag of the United States with a message stating this school renovation was made possible “with the assistance of the American people, through the United States Agency for International Development.” Afghan schools were now a more suitable place for students to learn, thanks in large part to the funding from the American people.

Growing up as a refugee in Pakistan and living in post-Taliban Kabul, the author’s textbooks, notebooks, and pens were all donated by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United
Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), and other development agencies.40 As a result of those donations, Afghan children received a primitive-level education that, in the author’s case, prepared him to later attend prestigious universities in the United States. Otherwise, most Afghan youth could not afford their books, dropped out of school, and later joined the ranks of the Taliban. The author received aid until 2004, when he was selected to participate in a one-year high school exchange program to the United States. Later, he returned for his undergraduate degree. The author is so passionate about development because he came out of the conflict zone successfully due to the help he received from aid agencies.

Before Bush outlined America’s role in post-Taliban Afghanistan during his speech at VMI, Japan had offered to host a two-day international donor conference on reconstruction assistance for Afghanistan in January 2002. The goal was to raise money to rebuild a conflict-ravaged Afghanistan following the ejection of the Taliban. Representatives from nearly 60 countries and 20 international organizations participated in the conference, signaling strong international support.41

The broad consensus among all the donor countries was that Afghanistan needed financial support for reconstruction, and the newly appointed government of Hamid Karzai needed money to run the country. Donors were happy to contribute and did so generously.

They simply wanted to know how much money was needed. The UN presented a framework for funding and a needs assessment to donors at the Tokyo conference. According to the assessment conducted by the UN Development Programme, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank, the price tag for rebuilding Afghanistan was estimated at $15 billion (USD) during the next decade from 2003 to 2013. In the same vein, the UN presented a short-term program of about $1.33 billion to help with the immediate needs of the government and people of Afghanistan in the first year.42

At the end of the conference, the international donor community agreed on several key priorities for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Education for girls, health care, infrastructure, agriculture, and reconstruction of the economic system were highlighted as five areas where the interim government and international donors needed to focus. Along with these priority areas, the Afghan Interim Authority led by Hamid Karzai also emphasized its commitment to transparency, efficiency, and accountability. The conference raised a significant amount of money. While some donor countries made multiyear commitments, others offered support in kind without specifying a monetary value. Overall, about $4.5 billion was raised for six years of aid.43

According to the USAID database, the United States spent $22.1 billion in Afghanistan between 2001

43 “Co-chairs’ Summary of Conclusions: The International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan” (paper presented at International Conference on Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan, Tokyo, Japan, 21–22 January 2002).
and 2008.\textsuperscript{44} The money was primarily appropriated for development purposes and not for military operations in the country. Afghanistan was the top aid recipient during this period, receiving on average $2.8 billion annually. No other country came close to receiving such large sums of aid money from the United States. As highlighted in the chart above, the amount of aid increased each year from $508 million in 2002 to about $8.9 billion in 2008, an increase of about 1,600 percent in seven years (figure 15).

The United States was not alone in this endeavor.

\textsuperscript{44} “Foreign Aid Explorer,” USAID, accessed 14 July 2021.
More than 20 other nations contributed to the reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan as well. According to Oxfam International, the top 10 donor countries highlighted in figure 16 poured more than $7.5 billion into the country during 2002–8.⁴⁵

Most of the $22.1 billion in aid that was provided by the United States between 2001 and 2008 (75.4 percent) was spent on programs related to the following three areas: Afghan security sector reform, infrastruc-

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Figure 17. Top sectors that received the most funding from Bush-era and USAID programs


ture, and counternarcotics. As highlighted in figure 17, Afghan security sector reform consumed more than $12.9 billion (62.5 percent); infrastructure, $1.7 billion (8.5 percent); and counternarcotics, $960 million (4.6 percent). The total price tag for these programs cost American taxpayers $15.5 billion.46

46 “Foreign Aid Explorer.”
CHAPTER THREE
Development Projects

The Security Sector Reform Program

At the Geneva Meeting on Afghan Security Sector in May 2002, the United States and other donor countries agreed to support the rebuilding of Afghanistan’s security forces.1 During the Soviet intervention of the 1980s, the Afghan National Police and Army had existed as organized forces based on the Soviet model. Officers were educated at a police academy, militarized, and well-equipped. During the Soviet-Afghan war and the period of Taliban rule that followed, law and order forces and the national defense army were disbanded. Guerrilla-like mujahideen forces and Taliban-like foot soldiers took charge of these institutions. There were no national civilian police or army forces in Afghanistan during this time.2 In December 2001, following the defeat of the Taliban by U.S.-led Coalition forces, the Northern Alliance militia factions that had assisted U.S. forces in the fight exploited an opportunity to place their guerrilla force leaders in key positions at the Ministries of Interior Affairs and Defense. Most of these men had little to no professional training or experience.

2 Andrew Wilder, Cops or Robbers?: The Struggle to Reform the Afghan National Police, Issues Paper Series (Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, 2007).
They had just come down from the Panjshir Mountains, where they had fought during the civil war and then held a stronghold against the Taliban.\(^3\)

A daunting task for the international community, and most importantly for the United States, was to build an effective civilian police force and a national army bound by the rule of law and respect for human rights. The starting point was an estimated 50,000 untrained police, mostly unpaid or underpaid factional commanders and their militias, with little or no equipment or infrastructure.\(^4\) At the Geneva conference, the United States took the lead to help build the Afghan National Army (ANA), and joined forces with Germany to train, equip, and advise the Afghan National Police (ANP).\(^5\) In 2003, the U.S. Department of State established a police training center in Kabul to provide in-service training for Afghan police currently serving in the capital. The program began with three American instructors handling the training for a handful of trainees selected by the Ministry of Interior Affairs. It offered courses used at the Kosovo Police Service School, with an 8-week course in police skills, a 5-week course in literacy, and 15 days of active training. After the initial pilot run, the program greatly accelerated the num-

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ber of Afghan police who received training, with the total number reaching 71,147 by the end of 2007.6

In December 2006, a Joint report by the inspectors’ general of the U.S. Departments of State and Defense found that U.S.-trained Afghan police were incapable of conducting routine law enforcement. The report also highlighted that Americans could not account for the equipment, vehicles, and weapons provided to the Afghan government as part of the training.7 In the last few years, some of the police pickup trucks ended up in the Taliban’s hands by attacking and controlling the police checkpoints. The report noted a suspicious number of “ghost police” who existed only on payroll lists. Police salaries were paid through the government by major donors, including the United States. The absence of reliable figures on police personnel numbers raised serious concerns that a significant amount of donor funds allocated for police salaries were being misappropriated. The salaries of these ghost police were pocketed either by the leadership at the Ministry of Interior Affairs or by militia commanders. While significant progress was made since then in reforming the payroll system for police salaries, such as developing individual salary payment (ISP) and electronic funds transfer (EFT) schemes, ghost police undoubtedly still existed.8

8 Interagency Assessment of Afghanistan Police Training and Readiness.
According to a report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), the Pentagon wasted more than $28 million on Afghan Army camouflage.\(^9\) Most of Afghanistan’s terrain is desert, and the ANA needed a uniform that would resemble the landscape in its area of operations. However, in this case, the Department of Defense agreed to purchase a camouflage pattern that replicated lush forests and paid $28 million for the procurement of such a uniform. According to the report, the Afghan minister of defense, Abdul Rahim Wardak, picked the pattern based on his fashion preference while browsing the internet, not based on advice from experts. “That was a dumb decision,” said John F. Sopko, the special inspector general. “It’s the totally wrong pattern for a country like Afghanistan. We are in Afghanistan; 98 percent of it is desert, so you would assume you want something that blended with the desert.”\(^10\) The report noted that altering the army’s uniform could have saved the United States between $68.6 and $72.2 million over 10 years.\(^11\)

The real question is this: What outcome was achieved by pouring such a massive amount of money during a period of six years—nearly $13 billion—into the security sector of Afghanistan? The answer is simple: very little progress was achieved. Corruption still ran rampant across the security sector in both the ANP and ANA. People did not feel safe, and the ANA strug-


\(^11\) *ANA Proprietary Camouflaged Uniforms*. **79**
gled to survive the barrage of attacks from the Taliban. The *San Francisco Chronicle* ran a story on 28 May 2007 that profiled a truck driver named Abad Khan, describing how “Afghan truck drivers quiver from lawlessness, not [the] Taliban.” Khan is quoted as saying, “We pay all our bribes to criminals, and they are criminals who wear police uniforms.” These truck drivers were the primary transporters of goods and fuel to foreign forces in the country. They were often stopped by police on main highways and asked for bribes ranging from $1 to $60 (USD). In some instances, fuel tankers were pulled over so police officers could fill up their cars. Another truck driver said, “Forget about the Taliban. Our biggest problems are with the police.”

In 2018, the Asia Foundation’s annual survey polled 6,263 people across all 34 provinces in Afghanistan. The respondents were all asked about their main causes for concern, with the majority (36 percent) citing security as the biggest challenge facing Afghanistan, more so than economic issues and unemployment. In the same survey, the percentage of people who feared for their personal well-being and security had reached its highest level since 2002, with 38 percent of the respondents saying they often feared for their safety. In addition, 49 percent of the respondents said they had some fear encountering officers of the ANP. Unfortunately, Af-

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13 Sands, “Afghan Truck Drivers Quiver from Lawlessness, not Taliban.”
15 *Afghanistan in 2008*, 32.
ghans had created very little confidence in their security forces, despite the massive investment by the United States and various other donor countries.

*Infrastructure*
Infrastructure is the bedrock of any country, and post-Taliban Afghanistan was in dire need of reconstructing its roads, bridges, schools, and hospitals that had been destroyed in the previous four decades. One of the first major projects that the United States embarked on following the removal of the Taliban was the reconstruction of the Kabul-Kandahar Highway. In 2003, the U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay M. Khalilzad stood with President Hamid Karzai at a ribbon-cutting ceremony inaugurating the completion of phase I (482 kilometers) of the highway (figure 18). This project was a massive undertaking by the United States to show the people of Afghanistan and the wider region that partnering with the United States pays great dividends. In his remarks at the opening ceremony, Khalilzad said, “This is a good day. We are standing—literally—on the road to Afghanistan’s future. It is a future of national unity. It is a future of prosperity. It is a future of peace.”

Between 1979 and 1989, the Soviet Union had financed a slew of road projects in Afghanistan, laying the groundwork for much of the country’s road system. This included the system for the Ring Road, which divides Kandahar and the capital city of Kabul. However, four decades of war largely destroyed the infrastructure

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across the country, starting with the Soviet invasion in the 1980s and followed closely by civil wars and the Taliban’s rise. Much of the Ring Road was reduced to a dirt track during the Taliban rule in the late 1990s, despite modest road improvements. The length of the wars and

Figure 18. Military convoys patrol the new highway, sharing the road with local traffic

Source: official U.S. Air Force photo.
lack of infrastructure led to considerable deterioration of roads, bridges, and tunnels. According to a 1994 road condition survey, only 17 percent of the roads were assessed to be in good condition. The average pace on the Kabul-Kandahar road was approximately 24 kilometers per hour, and the 482-kilometer journey from Kabul to Kandahar took roughly 20 hours.\textsuperscript{17}

The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) estimates that Afghanistan had about 50 kilometers of paved roads after the Taliban were deposed.\textsuperscript{18} It conducted an Afghanistan civil infrastructure assessment and delivered a final report to the Afghan government, concluding that the restoration of important roadways, notably the Ring Road, was a top priority for Afghanistan’s infrastructure. In 2001, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) conducted a road state survey and presented a report to the board of directors, stating that Afghanistan’s road infrastructure was in desperate need of repair because “damaged highways have become bottlenecks to the passage of people and goods.”\textsuperscript{19} The country’s economy would remain at a standstill without roads, since people would find it difficult to travel from one location to another and local products would be late to market. Based on these studies and proposals from USAID and ADB,

\textsuperscript{17} Comprehensive Needs Assessment for Reconstruction in the Transport Sector–Afghanistan (Mandaluyong, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2002).


\textsuperscript{19} Comprehensive Needs Assessment for Reconstruction in the Transport Sector–Afghanistan.
the Afghan government and international partners suggested a road network for Afghanistan, which they aimed to complete by 2015. The proposed network prioritized the country’s major roadways connecting Kabul to major cities including Kandahar, Mazari Sharif, and Herat.

The first significant Ring Road project was sponsored by USAID in 2002. The Kabul-Kandahar Highway connects the two cities that bear its name. It is one of the country’s most significant roadways, spanning 482 kilometers to the south and connecting the nation. The Bush administration initially rejected the Afghan government’s plan to restore the route, claiming that USAID had never completed road repair projects in post-conflict areas. However, given the significance of this route and its influence on Afghan life, USAID hired the Louis Berger Group (LBG) to rebuild the Kabul-Kandahar road as part of a large infrastructure program.

By early 2003, the roadway had become a major U.S. objective, and USAID was under constant pressure from Washington to show progress. Despite deaths, attacks, helicopter accidents, and supply difficulties, LBG engineers and personnel remained dedicated to the deadline. LBG completed phase one of the project and turned it over to the Afghan government at the end of 2003. The renovation of this route, which was originally

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21 Afghanistan Reconstruction.
DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

projected to cost $162 million, ended up costing $311 million. In essence, each kilometer of road repair cost the U.S. taxpayers around $1 million.\(^\text{22}\)

The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) sponsored another section of the Kabul-Kandahar route, called Section G, for $29 million (USD), covering roughly 50 kilometers of road. They also used LBG to complete the job. LBG subcontracted with Indian and South African companies, who in turn subcontracted with local Afghan businesses, who found further subcontractors in both situations.\(^\text{23}\)

Final reports and donor evaluations show the positive impact of the Kabul-Kandahar project. The highway enhanced efficiency by facilitating movement and transit, and it contributed to a considerable increase in business activities and income for people living within its zone of impact (an area 15 kilometers wide on either side of the road). Farmers are now able to expand their market outside local towns and boost their profits, as transportation costs have decreased.\(^\text{24}\)

In addition to its economic effects, the road had several positive social consequences. Many social services, including schools and medical facilities, opened up throughout the zone of influence. Villagers could now take their ill or injured to provincial capitals or Kabul for better care. Because of the increasing number of


\(^{23}\) Afghanistan: U.S.- and Internationally-Funded Roads.

\(^{24}\) Mafizul Islam, Roads Socio-Economic Impact Assessment: Kabul–Kandahar Road (Kabul: USAID Afghanistan, 2008), 1.
schools and greater access to transportation, more female students were now able to attend school.\footnote{Z. Wu et al., \textit{Afghanistan: Andkhoy-Qaisar Road Project}, Completion Report No. 37075 (Mandaluyong, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2010), 3.}

In terms of sustainability, none of the donor organizations, including USAID, took substantial measures to ensure the road’s long-term maintenance. Rather, they delegated that authority to the Afghan government. However, the government failed to fulfill its responsibilities due to a variety of issues, including a lack of human and financial resources. Because of these flaws, the government was unable to collect fees for the maintenance of the newly constructed road. The Kabul-Kandahar Highway is now in disrepair, with significant potholes caused by both wear and tear and roadside explosives in unstable regions. According to the World Bank, 85 percent of the road is in “poor condition, and the majority cannot be utilized by motor vehicles.”\footnote{Tom A. Peter, “Paved Roads a Positive Legacy of Afghan War. But Who Fixes Potholes?,” \textit{Christian Science Monitor}, 2 February 2015.} Figure 19 depicts what remains of the multimillion-dollar road project.

The road maintenance process was also hampered by a lack of capability in the private sector. Donors advised the Afghan Ministry of Public Works to include the private sector in road maintenance efforts. However, when the government asked for bids to maintain the Kabul-Kandahar road in 2006, it did not get a single proposal. As a result, the European Commission and USAID agreed to pay for temporary upkeep. The World
Bank also stated that it would support a $72 million (USD) yearly maintenance program.\textsuperscript{27}

The ultimate goal driving this massive post-conflict road rebuilding effort was to keep Afghanistan from de-

volving into a failed state and posing a threat to world security. Former U.S. military commander and ambassador to Afghanistan Karl W. Eikenberry famously remarked, “Where the road stops, the Taliban begins.”

Was his assertion true?

A *New York Times* story from 2007 offered a bleak image of the security condition on the Kabul-Kandahar Highway, stating that it was still plagued with danger, extortion, and betrayal. Police corruption and rebel attacks continued to frighten the populace, and traveling on portions of the route was dangerous at best. The Taliban used to conduct attacks on the road, and criminal activity such as robberies and extortion were widespread. Armed groups set up roadblocks and chased their victims on motorcycles and trucks.

While donor agency reports minimized the danger along this route, publications such as *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Telegraph* have widely reported on the road’s instability since the project’s launch. According to *The Telegraph*, “the Kabul–Kandahar Route was built at great expenditure as a symbol of achievement for the new Afghanistan, but instead the . . . road has become a highway of death that exposes what has gone wrong.” The Taliban, according to the report, were well aware of the significance of the road, and insurgents continued to launch assaults along the route. The statistics for road violence are grim, with 190 bomb attacks and 284 shootings in 2018, roughly

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one for every kilometer of road. The Kabul-Kandahar Highway has been a hot spot for rebel strikes and criminal activity for a number of reasons, including that corruption permeates not just the Afghan government but also development programs. Afghanistan’s contractual processes were riddled with loopholes that allowed Afghan government officials, construction companies, and donor agency officials to misappropriate cash.30

After a whistleblower revealed that the contractor had overbilled the U.S. government and bribed the Taliban to defend the road project, federal authorities punished LBG with the largest punitive assessment in a wartime contracting case in November 2012. LBG paid criminal fines of $18.7 million and civil penalties of $50.6 million. Due to loopholes, funding ended up in the hands of the Taliban, and contract procedures—or lack thereof—permitted LBG to engage an Indian subcontractor, as a joint venture of two other businesses, to conduct the work. The Indian firm then subcontracted the project to Afghan warlords who did not even have a registered business. Afghan subcontractors paid the Taliban millions of dollars to provide security and ensure that the project would not be attacked.31

These massive road developments bolstered the influence of warlords and the Taliban. Now that development is complete, warlords who profited financially from the project have greater power along the road. Their followers frequently dress up as police officers and

set up roadblocks. “They pose as Afghan National Police because they can stop someone with a Kalashnikov [AK-47] and half a uniform,” stated U.S. Army captain Matthew T. Hagerman. These armed people robbe travelers and abducted humanitarian workers. They also gave the Taliban the ability to plant improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and struck North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) supply convoys. In the end, these acts fed instability and allowed them to continue their illegal operations.32

Opium trafficking is the second most critical security risk along the Kabul-Kandahar Highway. According to the UN, “after 12 years of [the] US-led war in Afghanistan, the nation remains the world’s largest opium source, accounting for 90% of global supply.”33 While the Kabul-Kandahar road reconstruction has benefited the populations along the route, it has also presented a challenge to opium traffickers, especially given that 70 percent of narcotics trafficking occurs along major highways. There were fewer police checkpoints when the route was only a dirt track, allowing drug dealers to transport opium without being stopped by authorities. Although drug dealers continue to scare law enforcement by attacking checkpoints, a larger police presence became possible now that the road conditions had improved. However, local government officials continued to accept bribes and backed the traffickers in certain situations. While donor organizations evaluated the

impact of their projects on the economic well-being of communities along the route, they either failed to recognize or overlooked the likelihood of smugglers and illicit drug traffickers misusing the road.\textsuperscript{34}

The project designers’ failure to comprehend local Afghan social structures is the final and most crucial element contributing to an increase in violence along the route. Afghanistan is a tribal culture, with local leaders wielding considerably more power in rural regions than the central government. According to the World Bank, project execution in a conflict-affected setting like Afghanistan requires a detailed grasp of the local social structure, as well as the capacity to engage with community leaders to ensure project site access and security. A project like this was intended to create jobs in rural areas while also giving local leaders a say in the design and implementation. The road project was instead outsourced to international firms. Local Afghan elders were generally ignored while certain local contractors or warlords were employed to undertake a section of the project. They were mostly absent from the decision-making and execution phases. The projects did not employ locals, instead bringing Indian, Turkish, and Chinese workers in from other countries. Because they were cut out of the process, local residents did not feel compelled to support the initiative.\textsuperscript{35}

While $15.5 billion—almost 75.4 percent—of the overall U.S. aid package to Afghanistan during 2002–8 was allocated to the security sector reform, infrastruc-

\textsuperscript{34} Monitoring of Drug Flows in Afghanistan (Kabul: Afghanistan: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2007).

\textsuperscript{35} Proposed Grant for an Afghanistan Rural Access Project.
Figure 20. Sectors receiving the least funding from U.S. aid programs, 2002–8


In the context of development assistance, counternarcotics programs, the following sectors received only a small fraction—just 8 percent—of the total aid (figure 20).36

The rule of law and human rights program and the agriculture program each received about $362 million over six years. Basic education programs were awarded $364 million, while the health sector received about $46 million. Most importantly, maternal and child health, higher education, and trade investment programs combined only received about $69 million from 2002 to 2008. The most shocking figure shows that the last sec-

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tor—democracy, human rights, and governance—only received about $5,000 in six years.\textsuperscript{37}

It is important to highlight these figures and compare them with the top three sectors: security, infrastructure, and counternarcotics. While the latter sectors absorbed massive amounts of U.S. aid in the first six years of the war and yielded very few results, investing in the former sectors such as agriculture, basic education, and maternal health are critical for any country but extremely vital for a country like Afghanistan.\textsuperscript{38} It is a matter of life and death for a mother giving birth to a child in a hospital with no trained nurses or, even worse, with no hospital or clinic at all. While infrastructure paves the way for economic development, investment in quality education enlightens an entire generation so they cannot be easily targeted by extremists. Eradicating narcotics is a good idea, but investing in farmers and providing them with an alternative crop provides them the means to feed themselves for ages.

The reality is that when it came to investing their hard-earned taxpayer money in Afghanistan, donor nations got all of their priorities wrong. The Afghan government and donor nations never agreed on a set of long-term initiatives for Afghanistan’s economic growth. As a staffer at the Policy Department of the Ministry of Finance in Afghanistan between 2016 and 2018, the author was assigned to help align the National Priority Programs (NPP) of the Afghan government

\textsuperscript{37} “Foreign Aid Explorer.”
\textsuperscript{38} “Foreign Aid Explorer.”
with major donors’ wish lists. That portfolio included the infrastructure NPP, the urban development NPP, and the human capital development program. Overall, the government had 10 priority areas where they wanted international donors to invest. However, the issue of mismatched priorities between the Afghan government and international donors made it difficult to streamline funding for much-needed sectors. Unfortunately, the issue of donor fragmentation existed from the early days of this war.

It was not until 2005 that the Afghan government developed a strategy paper called the Afghanistan National Development Strategy: An Interim Strategy for Security, Governance, Economic Growth & Poverty Reduction. It was a 300-page document that outlined the government’s vision for economic development and its political and security priorities. While the gesture was genuine, most of the priorities outlined in the document were vague, unrealistic, and mere tag lines for donors at the London Conference for Afghanistan in 2006. The document envisioned “high rates of sustainable and eq-

39 National Priority Programs (NPP) refer to a set of 22 priority programs announced at the Kabul Conference in 2010. While the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) provides an overall strategy, the NPP represent a prioritization and further focusing of the ANDS, including specific deliverables and costs. In addition, there are more than 10 NPP that existed before and continue to operate, such as the National Solidarity Program. The new NPPs are currently being finalized and will significantly advance the ability of government to direct resources into areas that will have the greatest national impact.


uitable economic growth [by 2020] . . . to build a liberal market economy in which all Afghans can participate productively without engaging in production or trafficking of narcotics or other criminal activities.” The paper also outlined access to primary education for all children in the country who would attend secondary school. The government committed itself to “fight corruption [and] uphold justice and the rule of law.” What came out of the London Conference for Afghanistan was a list of 43 benchmarks and a timeline agreed on by all the donors. The deadline for achieving the benchmarks was the end of 2010, a four-year time frame.

Under the public administration reform benchmark, the Afghan government was tasked with “ensur[ing] a fiscally sustainable public administration” by the end of 2010. Moreover, “a clear and transparent national appointments mechanism will be established within 6 months, applied within 12 months and fully implemented within 24 months for all senior level appointments to the central government and the judiciary, as well as for provincial governors, chiefs of police, district administrators and provincial heads of securi-

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43 Afghanistan National Development Strategy, 16.
ty.” This benchmark was never achieved. Government appointments were mostly carried out at the discretion of the minister. Young Afghans newly graduated from colleges around the country and abroad could not find work because they did not know senior officials in the government who could vouch for them or hire them outright. During the Ghani administration, the Independent Administrative Reform and Civil Service Commission attempted a merit-based hiring process for all government appointments, but it did not make much progress. They could not vet candidates without external influence from warlords, senior government officials, or bribes.

In addition, public administration is not yet fiscally sustainable. Until the day the previous government collapsed, donors funded a significant portion of Afghan government employees’ monthly salary. The Afghan government did not have the means to pay its civilian staff.

Another benchmark was to provide electricity to at least 65 percent of households and 90 percent of non-residential establishments in major urban areas by the end of 2010. However, by the end of 2009, Professor Abdul Rahman Ashraf, senior advisor to President Karzai, reported the following at an international conference on the Afghan energy sector:

45 The Afghanistan Compact, 7.
48 The Afghanistan Compact.
• Only 10–15 percent of the Afghan population have access to electricity, one of the lowest figures in the world.
• About 3 percent of households (or 650,000) are connected to the national grid, mostly in large cities such as Kabul, Mazari Sharif, Herat, Kandahar, Jalalabad, etc.
• Approximately 340,000 customers are connected to the public power grid, 182,000 of which are in Kabul.
• The per-person total energy consumption is less than 25 kilowatt-hours (kWh) each year, compared to India (520 kWh), Germany (6,200 kWh), and the world average (3,060 kWh).
• Afghanistan sees a continuously rising energy demand, but most power stations are 40 years old and need to be rehabilitated.
• About 85 percent of the energy demand is covered by traditional biomass (e.g., wood and dung).\textsuperscript{49}

In the education sector, primary and secondary education were considered a higher priority. The government of Afghanistan intended to achieve at least 60–70

\textsuperscript{49} This list was adapted from Abdul Rahman, “Energy Sector Afghanistan: Importance of Renewable Energy for Afghanistan—Renewable Energy for Sustainable Development” (presentation, International Conference on Renewable Energy in Central Asia: Creating Economic Sustainability to Solve Socio-Economic Challenges, Dushanbe, Tajikistan, 10–11 November 2009).
percent net enrollment of boys and girls in primary school by the end of 2010. While the enrollment quota of 70 percent was achieved in major cities, the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) reported in 2018 that an estimated 3.7 million children were not in school, including 60 percent of the girls in the entire country.\(^{50}\) Low female enrollment was partly due to the lack of female teachers, the report noted, especially in rural areas. Only 16 percent of schools were girls-only and many of them lacked proper sanitation facilities, which further hindered attendance.\(^{51}\)

Under the poverty-reduction benchmark, the government had promised to decrease the proportion of people living on less than $1 a day (USD) by 3 percent per year and a total reduction of 9 percent by the end of 2010. The percentage of people living below the poverty line has since increased by 9 percent, according to a recent United Nations Development Programme human development report (figure 21).\(^{52}\)

Financial management was yet another indicator for the Afghan government to achieve by the end of 2010. At the donor’s conference in London, the government had promised to establish a transparent financial management system that meets the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) requirements and all other international standards.\(^{53}\) In turn, the donors would make more effort

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\(^{50}\) “Education: Providing Quality Education for All,” UNICEF, 2018.

\(^{51}\) “Education.”


Figure 21. Percentage of the Afghan population living below the poverty line, 2000–18


to channel a higher percentage of their financial support through the Afghan budget. In other words, donors will give their aid dollars directly to the Afghan government to use on projects rather than donors having to support their desired programs directly. When the author worked at the Ministry of Finance, the minister’s priority was financial management, and the country had not been successful on this front even by the time the author departed in 2018. As a result, the donors never trusted the government to spend their aid money, and they slowly walked back their promise of spending more through the Afghan government budget. Recently, the
Ministry of Finance published its 2020 budget. According to this document, international donors spent 34.61 percent of their overall assistance aid through the Afghan government national budget. The remaining 65.4 percent remained at the discretion of the donors, and the Afghan government had very little say in it.\textsuperscript{54}

Figure 22, which comes from the 2020 Afghan government budget proposal, highlights the fact that 48 percent of the national budget was comprised of foreign aid.

aid and 49 percent of domestic revenue. Sadly, this image further demonstrates that in the 20 years since the 9/11 attacks and the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan, almost one-half of the Afghan national budget still came from donor countries. There was no bigger threat to Afghanistan and what Afghans had achieved in the last two decades with the help from the United States than aid dependency. This type of monetary reliance was perpetual and never resulted in long-term economic development in the country.55

Until the day the Afghan government collapsed in August 2021, none of the aforementioned goals outlined at the 2006 London donor conference had been fully achieved. The Afghan economy was still in shambles, illicit drug trafficking was widespread, and a large portion of school-age children were unable to attend school due to a variety of issues including insecurity and a lack of school buildings, supplies, and trained teachers. Corruption was endemic and omnipresent in the government, and the rule of law was marred by bribery, intimidation, and subjugation of the underprivileged.

55 The citizens budget can be found at “1400 National Budget Document.”
On 27 March 2009, the newly elected president of the United States, Barack H. Obama, stood before the American people and announced his strategy for the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan. He was now the second U.S. president to preside over this prolonged war, and he believed he had a remedy for the stalemate in Afghanistan. Having campaigned on a platform that the United States needed to refocus its fight in Afghanistan, the American people were already somewhat familiar with Obama’s stance on the war. He insisted on withdrawing U.S. combat troops from Iraq on a fixed timeline and instead ramping up the American military effort in Afghanistan.¹ Now that he was president, it was time to act, and he did so by announcing his approach to the war.

Obama focused his strategy on a fundamental issue: questioning Pakistan’s role in the war in Afghanistan. The war had intensified across Afghanistan, and 2008 represented the deadliest year there for American troops. In his speech, Obama put forth the central question: “What is our purpose in Afghanistan? After so many years, [we] ask, why do our men and women still fight and die there? And [we] deserve a straightforward

answer.”

He went on to highlight his goal for the war, which was to “disrupt, dismantle and defeat al Qaeda in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and to prevent their return to either country in the future.” Furthermore, he noted that after the Iraq War began in 2003, Afghanistan had been denied the necessary resources to succeed. The president committed to providing those resources, including financial assistance to the government of Afghanistan, to accomplish the aforementioned goals.

In his first major military decision as commander in chief of the U.S. armed forces, Obama ordered the deployment of 17,000 troops to Afghanistan in February 2009. Later that spring, he sent 4,000 additional troops to train Afghan security forces and accelerate the efforts to build the Afghan National Army (ANA). Obama substantially increased the U.S. presence in Afghanistan during his first two years in office; total numbers of military personnel jumped from a little more than 30,000 in 2009 to more than 100,000 in 2011. A new commander, U.S. Army general Stanley A. McChrystal, was ordered to lead the war effort.

On the economic development front, Obama un-

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3 Obama remarks.
4 Obama remarks.
derscored the fact that “our efforts will fail in Afghanistan and Pakistan if we don’t invest in their future.”

The American mission in Afghanistan had always been a military one, but with it also came humanitarian assistance in the form of grants and development aid through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The Obama administration wanted to couple U.S. military might with financial support to win the hearts and minds of the population. As a result of this massive surge in troops and financial support to the government of Afghanistan, U.S. development assistance through USAID peaked during 2011 and 2012, reaching about $13 billion (figure 23).

The author was a sophomore at a small liberal arts college called St. Lawrence University, located in a remote area of upstate New York that was known for its long, cold winters and Sergi’s Italian Pizzeria, when Obama became the 44th president of the United States. It was the author’s first time witnessing American democracy firsthand, and he had closely followed all the presidential debates between Obama and his election opponent, John S. McCain III. Everyone openly shared their political views via various student clubs on campus—liberals, conservatives, and everything between.

Observing the election of the first African American president of the United States was monumental for this young foreign-exchange student, who was watching the election-day coverage live in the college’s student center with hundreds of other students.

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8 Obama remarks.
As the final tally came in, a big cheer erupted in the back of the room when Obama was announced the winner. Students ran out of the student center, making their way to the quad to cheer, dance, and set off firecrackers until late in the evening. The jubilation for this foreign student was immense because of the ties between Afghanistan and the United States. Knowing how dependent Afghanistan was on the United States, Obama’s election meant peace and prosperity for the author’s home country.

Not long after that joyful night, an uncle who lived in Boston called one early winter morning when the author was in class, asking to meet him in an hour near
the chapel. He said that he was going to Canada to visit a friend and stopped by on this way north. He asked the author to join him for breakfast at the university inn, where he had stayed the night before. As soon as they entered the uncle’s room, he locked the door and uttered words the author would never forget: “Your father passed away.” The uncle then called the author’s brother in Kabul, who tried to calm the author down and talk him through what had happened and how their father died. He assured the author that the burial and all other rituals had taken place with great dignity, and that their father was now in a better place. The author had hoped to return to Afghanistan after receiving his economics degree and discuss so many topics with his father, who had also been an economist. He dreamed of sharing his study abroad experience and showing his father how much he had learned in the United States. All those aspirations were gone.

The author’s father had fallen victim to the crippled healthcare system in Afghanistan. When the author was growing up, his father always complained about intestinal pain. He was told repeatedly by doctors that he had excess acid in his digestive system, which caused severe pain in his stomach. He was prescribed dozens of medications, and he took them all, but none of them made a significant difference. He had no other underlying health issues and was seemingly as healthy as a 20-year-old. He was told by a prominent doctor in Kabul that removing his gallbladder might help with his abdominal pain.

After a week of deliberation, he decided to take
the doctor’s advice and agreed to undergo the surgical procedure. According to the medical department at the University of California, San Francisco, the removal of the gallbladder is considered a minimally invasive surgery.\textsuperscript{10} Unlike open surgery, the number of cuts is limited in size and scope. The patient recovers more quickly and spends less time in the hospital. However, this is not the case in Afghanistan. Removing a gallbladder can cost your life. The author’s father died about eight hours after the surgery due to severe internal bleeding. The author’s brother said that he came out of the surgery fine and was speaking to him during that time until he appeared to doze off. When his brother ran out to find a nurse at the hospital, no one was there. The internal bleeding was so serious that it took the father’s life within an hour. Had he been attended to at the right time, would that have made a difference? Who dropped the ball: the doctor or the nurse? These questions remain troubling even 11 years later.

The moral of this story is that the health sector in Afghanistan remains underdeveloped, even today. Hundreds of people queue up in front of the embassies of Pakistan and India every day to apply for a travel visa. Some sit in wheelchairs and others lay on gurneys as the visa officer calls out names. Some are shoved to the ground; others are beaten by security guards. The scene in front of these embassies is abhorrent. Millions of Afghans travel annually to Pakistan and India for medical

\textsuperscript{10} “Cholecystectomy (Gallbladder Removal),” Department of Surgery, University of California-San Francisco, accessed 16 July 2021.
purposes. They need the most basic health services that are not available in Afghanistan.\(^\text{11}\)

Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic, Facebook is filled with posts from those who have lost their loved ones to the virus. The official government tally significantly underrepresents what is happening on the ground.\(^\text{12}\) According to personal stories, people with symptoms do not even go to the hospital to take the test, as they do not trust the health system. Those who have been tested do not get their results until weeks later. The previous government of Ashraf Ghani and now the Taliban have both failed to provide basic services such as oxygen to those in intensive care. Local news clips showed people purchasing oxygen tanks for thousands of Afghans, while the previous government squandered a $100.4 million (USD) grant provided by the World Bank as part of the COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project.\(^\text{13}\)

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\(^{11}\) Zabihullah Ghazi and Fahim Abed, “Demand for Pakistan Visas Sets Off Deadly Stampede in Afghanistan,” *New York Times*, 27 October 2020. *Medical tourism*, or travel to another country for cheaper or better healthcare, is a growing industry for many nations. Poor healthcare facilities and the absence of certain technologies and expertise in Afghanistan have created an income stream for neighboring countries as Afghans cross their borders for medical treatment. See Gareth Price and Hameed Hakimi, *Reconnecting Afghanistan: Lessons from Cross-border Engagement* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, 2019).

\(^{12}\) See “Afghanistan,” Reuters COVID-19 Tracker, accessed 10 September 2021. The data on this site was provided by the Ministry of Public Health, Afghanistan.

The Nation-Building Strategy, 2009–16

In December 2009, President Obama put forth a comprehensive strategy for the war in Afghanistan. He traveled to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York, to make his case to the nation and present his policy for this prolonged war as “the new way forward.”

First, Obama reiterated the fact that the United States never asked for this war, that it had been brought on by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001. While the hijackers who flew the commercial airliners into the World Trade Center and Pentagon were not Afghans, they had been trained in Afghanistan by a terrorist organization to attack the American homeland. Obama also shed light on the failures of the Afghan government, which was hampered by corruption, an underdeveloped economy, and insufficient security forces. The status quo was not sustainable, and something had to be done to change the course of the conflict in Afghanistan.

Obama presented a timeline for U.S. involvement in the country. His military strategy was to increase troop levels on the ground to break the Taliban’s momentum and increase Afghanistan’s own military and police capacity to fight the Taliban and al-Qaeda thereafter.

The president’s economic development strategy focused on the following statement: “The days of providing a blank check are over.” Instead, “America’s effort in Afghanistan must be based on performance.”

14 Barack H. Obama, “The New Way Forward—The President’s Address” (speech, U.S. Military Academy at West Point, NY, 1 December 2009).
15 Obama, “The New Way Forward.”
16 Obama, “The New Way Forward.”
17 Obama, “The New Way Forward.”
of unaccountable spending and wasteful construction were over, according to this new policy. Nonetheless, Obama promised to increase development funding for Afghanistan through USAID.

Afghans on the streets of Kabul today would likely tell you that 2010 and 2011 were the best years for their businesses and livelihood. These two years mark a time when U.S. financial support to Afghanistan reached its peak. The trickle-down effect of such large sums of grants to the Afghan government was so significant that even ordinary fruit vendors on the side of the road benefited from increased business. Private and public construction projects boomed during this period, and many people working directly or indirectly for U.S. military or civilian contractors had large sums of disposable income.18

The question is whether this massive spending by the United States made any long-lasting impact on the Afghan economy. Did it help build a sustainable economy that would provide a decent living for ordinary Afghans for years to come without donor assistance?

The Second Afghan Presidential Election
President Obama’s first major challenge in Afghanistan was not so much about his military posture against the Taliban and al-Qaeda but about the next Afghan presidential election.19 For the United States and the world

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to maintain the democratic process that had been built in the country during the previous eight years, they had to make sure its second presidential election took place on time. President Hamid Karzai’s first term was about to expire in July 2009, and under the Afghan constitution, elections had to be held no later than 60 days before the end of the presidential term.\[20\] However, voting was postponed by two months, reflecting the lack of strategic planning by the Afghan government and international donors. Karzai’s term was extended until a new leader could be elected.\[21\]

The international community, including the United States, agreed to give $224 million (USD) for the 2009 Afghan presidential election.\[22\] According to the National Democratic Institute, approximately 4.6 million people turned out to vote on election day, which was considerably low compared to the 8 million who participated in 2004.\[23\] Observers reported low turnout of women, notably in certain polling stations in the southern and southeastern parts of the country where no women voted. Before the election, the Taliban had issued threats against anyone who participated in the election, including cutting off inked fingers, which fueled fear and resulted in low turnout among vot-

\[20\] Afghan Const. § 3, art. LXI says: “Elections for the new President shall be held within 30 to 60 days prior to the end of the presidential term.”


\[23\] The 2009 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections, 37.
ers in general and among female voters in particular.\textsuperscript{24}

Based on the total election budget and overall turnout in the presidential election, the actual cost of each ballot was estimated at about $52 per vote, which would be the equivalent of one month’s salary for a ordinary civil servant or the income of a street vendor who feeds a family of six or seven people.\textsuperscript{25}

Ultimately, the election results were marred by widespread fraud and ballot box stuffing.\textsuperscript{26} Following the election, the Independent Election Commission (IEC) of Afghanistan—the body in charge of the election—made various announcements of partial results. These results lacked transparency and fueled suspicion among international observers. Investigation by observers revealed massive inconsistencies in the numbers provided by the IEC, and the partial results were believed to be choreographed to tamper with the actual vote count.

Finally, after a month of deliberation, the preliminary election results came out in favor of Karzai with 55 percent of the vote and Abdullah Abdullah with only 28 percent. After the Electoral Complaints Commission reviewed more than 3,000 complaints, the final presidential election results were announced in October, two months after the election.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{25} The 2009 Presidential and Provincial Council Elections.
\textsuperscript{26} Hicks, “Intimidation and Fraud Observed in Afghan Election.”
However, that was not the end of it. Abdullah did not concede and instead proclaimed himself the winner.\(^{28}\) As a prominent Tajik leader, he used his base to stir up ethnic tensions, since Karzai was seen as more of a Pashtun leader.\(^{29}\) Abdullah’s actions could have possibly taken the country to the brink of yet another civil war. At this point, the Obama administration felt the need to intervene to avoid the unnecessary internal turmoil amid the war against the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

The Obama administration, through U.S. senator John F. Kerry (D-MA), mediated between the two contenders. After weeks of back and forth between Karzai and Abdullah, Kerry was able to convince both parties to participate in a runoff election. On 20 October, Karzai appeared at a press conference alongside Kerry, U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan Karl W. Eikenberry, and United Nations (UN) Special Representative for Afghanistan Kai A. Eide to announce that he would participate in a runoff. However, a week later, Abdullah withdrew from the runoff, citing that adequate measures had not been taken to prevent the recurrence of fraud. The IEC canceled the runoff election and declared Karzai the winner of the 2009 presidential election.\(^{30}\)

However, after Karzai was out of office, he said that unlike the administration of U.S. president George


\(^{29}\) For more on the differences between these two groups, see Abubakar Siddique, \emph{Afghanistan's Ethnic Divides} (Oslo: Norwegian Peace-building Resource Centre, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012).

W. Bush, the Obama administration was not on good terms with him. He believed that they wanted him removed from office during the 2009 presidential election. According to one of Karzai’s associates, the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard C. A. Holbrooke, was the main architect of the plot against the Afghan president.31

Clearly, democracy was still on very shaky ground in Afghanistan. Despite having spent millions of dollars on electoral processes and institutions, the country’s election bodies still lacked the institutional capacity to carry out a nationwide election without causing suspicion on the outcome that could result in massive internal turmoil.

*International Donor Conferences, 2009–16*

During President Obama’s time in office, three major international donor pledge conferences were held to solicit financial support for the development of Afghanistan. Since 2001, these conferences had become somewhat routine.32 It had been more than a decade since the beginning of the war, and Afghanistan was still in need of development aid from the rest of the world. How did the international community and Afghan government fail to achieve sustainable development in Afghanistan? Why was the country still in need of foreign aid after 10 years, after 20 years?

On 12 June 2008, 68 countries and more than 15

31 “Interview with Karim Khurram about His New Book,” YouTube, 26 August 2019, 1:20:21 min.
international organizations led by the United States attended the Paris Conference on Afghanistan. They pledged about $20 billion (USD) in aid for the country’s development strategy for the next four years. The United States promised more than $10.2 billion in aid over two years, which was more than 50 percent of the overall pledge made by all other countries.\textsuperscript{33} The Afghan government presented the \textit{Afghanistan National Development Strategy} (ANDS) to the donors at this conference. The strategy outlined a list of commitments that would be achieved by 2013. The donors and the Afghan government agreed on a set of priorities to strengthen institutions and economic growth, particularly in agriculture and energy. They also endorsed the Afghanistan Compact, a set of ambitious goals agreed on at the London Conference a year prior that covered all sectors of security, governance, and development, including the cross-cutting goals of counternarcotics and regional cooperation.\textsuperscript{34}

The \textit{Afghanistan National Development Strategy} (2008–13) is a 200-page document that covers a broad array of issues, including policy direction, development strategy, aid effectiveness, coordination, and implementation framework. This document discusses every possible scenario and policy direction for poverty reduction, employment creation, economic growth, infrastructure, and private sector development. It includes a laundry list of issues that need to be addressed, but it reads as


\textsuperscript{34} Paris declaration.
yet another wish list from the Afghan government to
 donor countries for the sole purpose of soliciting further
development aid or as a justification document for re-
ceiving the funds from mostly European countries and

Following the Paris Conference, yet another con-
ference was held in Tokyo in July 2012. Once again,
major donor countries gathered and pledged to give Af-
ghanistan another $16 billion (USD) in development
aid through 2015, or approximately $4 billion annual-
ly. The United States reportedly made a commitment
of $1–2 billion annually.\footnote{Katerina Oskarsson, Second International Tokyo Conference on Afghani-
stan (Brussels, Belgium: Civil-Military Fusion Centre, North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 2012).} The difference this time was
that there was no massive wish-list document like the
ANDS, but rather a set of goals set forth by donors for
the Afghan government to meet by the end of 2015 in
exchange for the aid in the Tokyo Mutual Accountability
Framework (TMAF).\footnote{“Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework,” USAID, 8 July 2012.}

According to the Tokyo framework, the Afghan
government and the international community had
reaffirmed their partnership to focus on the econom-
ic growth and development of Afghanistan through a
process of mutual accountability in achieving jointly
decided goals. The aid was conditional based on the de-

delivery of each commitment outlined in the framework.
One of the main pillars of the TMAF was to help direct
the Afghan government and the economy toward self-
reliance. As part of that effort, the Afghan government
was given more ownership of projects. In exchange, donors requested that the Afghan government put together a list of National Priority Programs (NPP). The idea was to ensure optimal execution and effectiveness of international assistance aligned with national priorities that the government deemed necessary. The Tokyo framework outlined 16 benchmarks that needed to be achieved for the Afghan government to receive the full pledged amount of $16 billion.38

Four years later, yet another international pledging conference was scheduled to take place on 5 October 2016 in Brussels. The European Union agreed to co-host the conference with the government of Afghanistan to bring in the international community to reaffirm their commitment to the development of Afghanistan. More than 75 countries and 26 international organizations and agencies participated in the conference and pledged approximately $15 billion (USD) for the next four years.39

The author helped facilitate technical arrangements for the Brussels Conference. As part of the policy team at the Ministry of Finance in Afghanistan, he and his associates worked closely with the international donor countries, particularly with the European Union, in Kabul a year in advance to plan for the conference. Unlike previous events, the international community now had more confidence in the capacity of Afghans to lead the groundwork for the conference. Afghans who had stud-

38 “Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework.”
ied in the United States, Europe, or Australia were back in Afghanistan and were working for the government. Afghan president Ashraf Ghani’s first-term administration made considerable efforts to appeal to people to come work in Afghanistan. These Western-educated Afghans took on responsibilities that were once fulfilled by international expats who received significant compensation and other benefits, representing one of the ways that large sums of aid money given to the Afghan people vanished and ended up back in Europe and America. An ordinary technical staff member who had received an annual salary of $80,000–$85,000 in the United States was making three to four times that amount in Afghanistan. However, the newly Western-educated Afghans held those jobs at a fraction of the cost to either the Afghan government or American taxpayers.40

Hundreds of thousands of young Afghans received scholarships to study abroad in the last 20 years, which is regarded as one of Afghanistan’s best success stories.41 The author came to the United States as a high school exchange student through a program sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. He was a part of the first group of 40 Afghan students to arrive in the United States following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks. The American government and families who had


agreed to host the students for the school year greeted them with open arms. The author’s personal experience shows that a small initial investment in Afghanistan’s education sector has the potential for a significant snowball effect. Those who participated in the exchange program are now highly qualified individuals who have either returned to Afghanistan to work or are contributing to their country of birth from afar.

Afghanistan: An Amazingly Young Country
Despite its difficulties, Afghanistan is a young and growing country. According to Index Mundi, the latest demographic data from Afghanistan shows that 63.5 percent of the population is younger than 24 years. There are 7.6 million Afghan children between the ages of 10 and 19 who are poised to enter higher education in the next few years.42 Today, the average age of the Afghan population is 18.6 years.43 This offers an amazing opportunity for Afghanistan because it comes at a time when the rest of the world is aging.

According to some estimates, the average age of the population in India is 29 years; in Pakistan, 25 years; in China, 40 years; in Europe, 46 years; in the United States, 40; and in Afghanistan, 20.44 These young Afghans are poised to transform their country and the world’s faith. Afghanistan will have approximately 12

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42 “Afghanistan Demographics Profile,” Index Mundi, accessed 31 May 2021.
million people in the 20–24 age group entering the labor force, whereas most other developed countries will have a significant labor force deficit. While the opportunity is there for young Afghans to take, it remains to be seen as to whether they are prepared to seize the opportunity.

If Afghanistan can equip, educate, and train its younger generation, it will not only transform its own economy and society but also possibly impact the world. If Afghanistan fails to capitalize on this opportunity, the demographic dividend discussed here will transform into a demographic disaster. Recent history has made clear what happens when unemployed, dissatisfied, and uneducated young people fall victim to the Islamic State and the Taliban’s propaganda machines. In this interconnected world, education is more than just a social or economic issue for Afghans—it is also a national security issue on a global scale.

Initially, following the fall of the Taliban regime, the Afghan government needed to expand the higher education system. According to the World Bank, three decades of war and devastation had left Afghans with a 17-percent literacy rate. In early 2001, there were only 7,800 students enrolled in the higher education system at no more than seven universities in the country. As a result, growth was critical. By 2015, Afghanistan’s literacy rate had increased to 58 percent, student enrollment had increased to 174,424, and the number of universities had increased to 76. Thus, in the 20 years since the

46 “Afghanistan: Overview.”
Taliban, a tremendous amount of expansion took place. However, one out of every three school-age children was still absent from the classroom.\footnote{“Education System Profiles: Education in Afghanistan.”} The system’s expansion did not go far enough, and it failed to educate everyone.

In the aftermath of the Taliban, the Afghan government strove for equity, including those previously excluded from education, and attempted to connect with those who had previously been unreachable. During the Taliban’s reign in the 1990s, female literacy had been close to zero.\footnote{Emma Graham-Harrison and Akhtar Mohammad Makooi, “‘The Taliban Took Years of My Life’: The Afghan Women Living in the Shadow of War,” \textit{Guardian}, 9 February 2019.} There were no female students enrolled in school. The government and international donor agencies made significant efforts to improve this statistic; however, in some areas of Afghanistan, the enrollment rate for females is still zero. It is now incumbent on the Taliban to reach out to those rural areas and provide educational opportunities for women and disadvantaged students, while also allowing male and female students in major cities to return to school.

How has Afghanistan fared in terms of getting the expansion and equity sides of the formula right? The education system still requires improvement. Several post-Taliban universities, including the American University of Afghanistan and Kardan University, provide high-quality education in Kabul. However, the average Afghan higher education institution is simply not of the expected quality. Students who have graduated from the majority of these institutions are still unemployed.\footnote{“I Won’t Be a Doctor, and One Day You’ll Be Sick”: \textit{Girls’ Access to Education in Afghanistan} (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2017).} They
do not have the necessary skills for the jobs available. Some businesses and ministries provide capacity-building training to compensate for basic skill deficiencies required for the job. Improving the quality of secondary and tertiary education is a critical government task.

Overall, Afghanistan must prepare its young people for the challenges of the twenty-first century. In the age of Google, where information can be found with the click of a mouse, they require not only new graduates with a quality education but also a workforce that is well-rounded and trained to support the ever-changing labor market. The workforce must be able to react to unfamiliar facts and details and be capable of synthesizing information that has not been studied. There is no doubt that the challenges are massive.

In preparation for the Brussels Conference, just as with the Paris Conference of 2008 where the Afghan government presented donors with the *Afghanistan National Development Strategy*, President Ghani and his new administration were committed to displaying a similar declaration to donors. The technical team was assigned to work on a comprehensive strategy paper called the *Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) 2017 to 2021*. The theme of the document was self-reliance through sustainable economic development that will help Afghanistan bring an end to poverty.\(^{51}\) The author was tasked with creating a five-year infrastructure plan for Afghanistan as part of a

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major push by the government to draw more aid to the education sector and beyond.

Infrastructure was considered a vital sector by Ghani and his team. During the 2014 Afghan presidential campaign, Ghani published a 309-page election manifesto in which he envisioned infrastructure development through the prism of regional connectivity. The author’s job was to develop a five-year roadmap for achieving that vision.

Putting together this massive document was no simple matter. The first task was to bring together all the relevant ministries of the government and discuss what they deemed most important for infrastructure development. This informal conference was meant to include members from the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing, the Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, the Ministry of Transport and Civil Aviation, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, and several others. Ultimately, however, none of these groups were willing to participate, either because they did not have a plan for relevant infrastructure development in their sectors or because they did not want to share it. They did, however, submit multipage documents laying out what they thought infrastructure development meant for them. None of the information helped craft the infrastructure plan, however. An infrastructure plan had never been developed for the country in the past.

The next step was to seek assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), which had made significant investments in Afghanistan’s infrastructure development during the previous decade. Thanks in large part to the ADB for providing the author with the technical support for producing the infrastructure plan, the working group was able to put together a compressive investment pipeline for 2017–21 that focused on the efficient planning, delivery, and operation of infrastructure at the national and local levels.\footnote{Afghanistan: Improving the Development Effectiveness of the Afghanistan Infrastructure Trust Fund (Manila, Philippines: Asian Development Bank, 2020).}

Finding a mechanism to reach international maritime markets is critical for Afghanistan, a landlocked country (figure 24). Pakistan and Iran have both used their trade lines as political leverage over the Afghan government in the post-Taliban era and they continue to do so now. In retribution for the killing of 24 Pakistani soldiers by a U.S. unmanned drone in November 2011, Pakistan’s government decided to restrict the supply lines to Afghanistan. Thousands of containers loaded with commercial items heading for Afghanistan were stranded at the Port of Karachi. Businesses suffered significant losses as perishable items rotted and nonperishables were grounded for weeks.\footnote{“Pakistan Outrage after ‘Nato Attack Kills Soldiers’,” BBC News, 26 November 2011.}

Afghanistan recorded a 77-percent trade imbalance last year with a $3.2 billion (USD) trade deficit as a result of these difficulties.\footnote{“Afghanistan Products Exports, Imports, Tariffs by Country and Region, 2018,” WITS Data, World Bank, accessed 19 July 2021.} To address the lack of sea
access, the Afghan government developed a five-year infrastructure development blueprint for the first time, highlighting structural challenges for the country and the path forward for transforming Afghanistan from a landlocked to land-connected country, as Ghani had proposed in his election manifesto.57

Afghanistan’s infrastructure continues to be a major barrier to the country’s global success. Despite large infrastructure investments and improvements since 2002, poor transportation connectivity, regional market integration hurdles, insufficient legislative and regulatory changes, institutional capacity, and human skill limits

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57 Ghani, Manifesto of Change and Continuity Team.
restrict economic growth. Regional market integration difficulties, insufficient policy and regulatory reforms, institutional capacity and human skill limits, persistent security issues, and limited operations and maintenance funds for existing infrastructure were all significant constraints.

The National Infrastructure Plan, 2017–2021 (NIP) outlined the government’s ideas for improving infrastructure investment efficiency. The NIP included an infrastructure investment pipeline to aid in the development of a transportation network system. The pipeline was intended to enhance the country’s economic development by increasing access to domestic, regional, and worldwide markets. This included rail and road investments, such as the Kabul Ring Road, border road links, the Salang Tunnel in the Hindu Kush mountain range, and road operations and maintenance projects. It also extended to urban transportation, civil aviation, trade facilitation, dry ports, and transport logistics. The plan detailed a road map for regional connectivity, including efficient infrastructure delivery that created jobs and linked goods to markets in Afghanistan and the region.58

Regional connectedness would be achieved by enhanced transportation networks, freight and logistics supply chains, energy supplies, and high-speed telecommunications. Afghanistan must become a regional hub that connects Central Asia and South Asia, as well as China and Europe, in an east-westerly route to reap the benefits of its geographic dividend.59 The National Infrastructure Plan streamlines the following invest-

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ments to promote regional possibilities with significant domestic returns and benefits.

*Moving Energy*

Afghanistan was meant to be a utility corridor connecting Central Asia’s energy-rich countries with South Asia’s energy-poor countries. Three projects were in the works:

- The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan (TAP) power transmission line, which would deliver 2,000 megawatts (mw) of electricity from Turkmenistan to Pakistan via western Afghanistan, with the capacity to expand to 4,000 mw in the future.
- The Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, which would carry natural gas from Turkmenistan to Pakistan and India via Afghanistan.
- The Central Asia-South Asia (CASA)-1000 transmission lines, which would transport more than 1,000 mw of electricity from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan.\(^6^0\)

These three programs built on previous work and were in the process of increasing regional bulk energy transfers. The projects would require significant funding, with the TAP costing an estimated $500 million (USD) and the TAPI costing an estimated $12.5 billion, with

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$7 billion coming from private sources. The estimated cost of CASA-1000 was $1.17 billion (figure 25).\textsuperscript{61}

In the coming decade, Pakistan is estimated to require more than 15,000 mw of extra electricity.\textsuperscript{62} The aforementioned projects are well-positioned to supply

\textsuperscript{61} National Infrastructure Plan, 2017–2021, 42.

an economically feasible energy source from Central Asian countries with abundant energy resources to Pakistan via Afghanistan. This is a critical part of how regional connection may benefit not only Afghanistan but the entire region.

The primary goal was getting products and merchandise across Afghanistan to the rest of the region. The importance of regional trade connectivity and the national goal of completing the Ring Road were reflected in the National Infrastructure Plan’s transportation sector priorities. Three of the six Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC) corridors had a key link running parallel to motorways in Afghanistan. Afghanistan would also lie along the corridor connecting Tajikistan via Sher Khan Bandar (Kunduz Province) to Islam Qala (Herat Province), which connects to Iran, as part of China’s “One Belt One Road” initiative. Later in 2017, the Turkmen railroad arrived at Aqina, Afghanistan. This paved the way for the Lapis Lazuli Corridor, which provided an alternative route for products from China, as well as imports and exports from Afghanistan, to reach Europe via Turkmenistan and the Caspian Sea. By connecting these regional transit links, Afghanistan’s proposed railroad beltway would open up new economic potential.

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63 For more on China’s infrastructure initiative, see Andrew Scobell et al., *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2018), https://doi.org/10.7249/RR2273.

The national railway plan saw prospects for railway spurs to Pakistan via Torkham (Nangarhar Province) and Spin Boldak (Kandahar Province) ports, which would help move commodities from Pakistan to Central Asian countries. Similarly, with the development of the Charbahar (Iran) and Gwadar (Pakistan) ports, Afghanistan may become the most cost-effective path for Central Asian countries to access international markets and connect with the Arabian Peninsula and beyond for both imports and exports.

**Moving Data**

Because Asia and Europe account for roughly one-half of all internet traffic, the future is filled with data transfer opportunities. The current data transfer channel uses a maritime fiber that spans the Mediterranean, passes through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, and wraps around Asian markets at a rate of about 15 terabytes per second.\(^65\) This path has a number of issues. First, maritime cables are more susceptible to constant maintenance, damage, and entities being able to harness the cable. Second, due to the long pathway, data transfer takes approximately 130 milliseconds, which is extremely slow.\(^66\)

By increasing internet connectivity and modernizing relevant policies and regulatory frameworks, the digital CASA program and fiber optic networks were viewed as lifelines for the telecommunications sector. Due to the high costs of internet packages, internet penetration

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remains low across CASA countries, despite significant levels of mobile cellular usage.\textsuperscript{67} Following the Afghan government’s approval of an open-access policy to end the existing monopoly in the telecommunications sector, companies were able to actively invest and, where necessary, form public-private partnerships. As a result, costs would be reduced while user services and access would be expanded.\textsuperscript{68}

These connectivity projects have the potential to generate significant revenue for the transit system. In the long term, the proposed data movement (TASEM and digital CASA) could generate hundreds of millions of dollars.\textsuperscript{69} TAP is expected to generate $200 million or more, while CASA-1000 transit fees are expected to generate $40 million.\textsuperscript{70}

The \textit{National Infrastructure Plan, 2017–2021}, proposed a pipeline of ongoing and new projects. The strategy was to increase the efficiency of infrastructure investment while also including new projects with the potential for public-private partnership participation. The project selection criteria included economic and social benefits (direct and indirect), income growth, employment and poverty reduction, sustainability, security risk environment, and regional connectivity prospects. The total cost of the projects was estimated to be around $6 billion (USD), with infrastructure development projects requiring $1 billion per year.\textsuperscript{71} This was the amount

\textsuperscript{67} Enhancing Connectivity and Freight in Central Asia.
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{National Infrastructure Plan, 2017–2021.}
\textsuperscript{69} TASEM refers to technology assisted science, engineering, and mathematics.
the Afghan government planned to ask donors for at the Brussels conference.

One of the two major side events at the conference—the regional economic cooperation event—was designated for presenting the National Infrastructure Plan. High-level representatives from more than 25 countries and 15 multilateral organizations attended the gathering. President Ghani was invited as a keynote speaker. The opening remarks were given by the European commissioner for international cooperation and development, Neven Mimica, and the vice president of the ADB, Wencai Zhang. Following Ghani’s keynote address, in which he spoke about the importance of Afghanistan’s geographical location in helping facilitate the economic integration of the region, the president’s chief advisor, Mohammad Humayon Qayoumi, presented the National Infrastructure Plan. The overall response to the presentation of the infrastructure roadmap was very positive, and donor countries agreed to pay the requested amount for infrastructure development: $1 billion per year for five years.

However, it has been five years since the Brussels conference took place, and none of the aforementioned projects have come to fruition. One of the main reasons for this lack of progress is the scarcity of human capital in government ministries tasked to develop and initiate the projects. According to the Ministry of Finance’s General Directorate of Budget, the Afghan government ministries were able to spend only 67 percent of their

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total development budget in 2017, 73 percent in 2018, and 85 percent in 2019. They were not able to spend the $1.6 billion (USD) in the last three years that was allotted to them in the national budget. Some of this money had come directly from Afghan government revenue, but more than 80 percent of the overall development budget for these line ministries had been provided by donors as nondiscretionary funds (figure 26).

Lack of expertise within these ministries is one critical issue. Corruption is yet another problem that hinders progress in Afghanistan. According to the most recent Integrity Watch Afghanistan survey, more than 4.6 million Afghans paid some sort of bribe in 2018 (figure 27). That is an increase of about 35 percent in the last two years. Moreover, the total amount of bribes paid in 2018 amounted to more than $1.65 billion (USD), which is about 9 percent of the total GDP of Afghanistan (figure 28). The study also highlights that the decline in the total value of bribes by about 43 percent since 2016 is due to two main reasons:

*with a significant increase in the proportion of Afghans living below the national poverty line from 38 percent in 2011/12 to 55 percent in 2016/17—which may mean that citizens’ ability to pay bribes has weakened . . . and possibly the success—*

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