Donor interventions in Afghanistan

A Lessons for Peace literature review

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Key messages

Leveraging specific lessons learned from past peace processes in Afghanistan, this paper considers how peace processes and associated programming might be designed to support sustainable peace that delivers for all Afghans. In a fragmented donor environment, it highlights the importance of joined-up humanitarian and development programming in a post-peace context, as well as of building inclusive and legitimate institutions.

Key lessons:

- Following the Soviet troop withdrawal in the late-1980s, peace lapsed because the accord process took a top-down approach that neglected local perspectives. In recent years peace talks have been characterised by short-termism, conflicting international policies, an absence of oversight of implementation, as well as an assumed tabula rasa going into negotiations.

- Existing institutions may not be fit-for-purpose in a post-conflict governance setting. Power-sharing, constitutional reform and integration of Taliban security forces must be sensitive to elite interests and the risk of further fragmenting the Afghan state and damaging already-weak capacity for service delivery. Tackling crime and corruption requires multifaceted and sustained approaches, owing not least to Afghanistan's legal pluralism.

- Local ownership and agency in directing and monitoring aid flows is essential to strengthening state legitimacy and capacity. The full breadth of National Priority Program policy proposals must receive donor support, not just the most appealing. Foreign troop withdrawal may remove harmful tensions between competing military and civilian-led development efforts.

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Acronyms

ALP	Afghan Local Police
ANP	Afghan National Police
ARTF	Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund
CDC	community development council
DDR	disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration
FARC	Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
IS	Islamic State in Afghanistan
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NSP	National Solidarity Program
NUG	National Unity Government
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PRT	Provincial Reconstruction Team
SCA	Swedish Committee for Afghanistan
SIGAR	Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction
UN	United Nations
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USIP	United Sates Institute of Peace

Executive summary

Half a dozen rounds of national peace talks in Afghanistan since the Soviet invasion in 1979, and interventions by the international community to develop institutions critical to democracy and sustainable peace, have not achieved the broader goals of building peace and a democratic state. This is largely due to a lack of understanding of Afghan society and politics; the exclusion of key actors from negotiated settlements; unrealistic timelines, budgets, and objectives; and the competing interests and agendas of external actors. A number of key challenges, mistakes and failures have been identified on how to better support an Afghan peace process and post-conflict peace:

- Peace efforts must prioritise inclusivity to avoid resurgence of conflict later on.
- International engagement has to be rooted in understanding of both context and actors.
- International engagement driven by individual state geopolitical interests is likely to fail.
- Any meaningful change will take time.
- Effective aid delivery requires fewer, more demonstrably successful projects.
- Integration of armed groups by inserting them into weak state security forces will not work.
- Development policy must be coordinated with the Afghan government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or other local actors.
- Effective peace-building requires a realistic exit plan.

In the pre-Taliban era (1980s), Soviet negotiations with the Mujahedeen yielded important concessions from the then-government: a unilateral ceasefire, revision of the constitution, prisoner releases, and a power-sharing government. However, the level of support for these talks across multiple actors remained unclear and the option to regain power after Soviet withdrawal made commitments to powersharing questionable. Actors that were deemed too extreme were excluded from the talks. A subsequent reconciliation process failed, also due to the uncertain political future.

Internal Afghan developments were historically shaped by Afghanistan's relationship with its neighbour Pakistan. Agreements on non-interference and non-intervention in the 1980s, including refraining from supporting each other's rebellions, and supporting voluntary return of refugees, were soon marred by mutual accusations of breaches. International engagement during the cold war was driven by geopolitical interests, rather than by support for peace in Afghanistan.

After the Taliban took power in the mid-1990s, US concerns centred around the presence of Osama Bin Laden in Afghanistan. In the post-9/11 period, US battle successes led to the collapse of the Taliban government, but opportunities were missed for a negotiated settlement. The Bonn Agreement in 2002 was largely driven by US military interests, but established the foundations for the future Afghan government, with former Mujahedeen controlling important cabinet posts, which created the conditions for the Taliban insurgency.

Throughout this time, international efforts were hampered by short timelines and aid community fragmentation (including the US military as a major implementer of aid delivery) leading to ineffective aid delivery. Successes of service delivery programmes have been uneven, with the education sector the most demonstrably successful. Rule of law initiatives have not bolstered peace-building efforts, and international actors seem largely uncomfortable with legal pluralism. With dynamics shifting towards government forces being a greater threat to civilians than the Taliban, the need for civilian oversight of the military came into sharp focus.

With few exceptions, civil society, and particularly marginalised groups, have been systematically excluded from peace talks or their inclusion has been symbolic. Both the exclusion of key political actors and civil society is now widely recognised as being at the heart of failed peace attempts, along with a continuously short-term perspective, the notion that each round of peace talks starts with a blank slate, and the lack of policy coherence and oversight. Often support for Afghanistan has assumed that institutions are non-existent and can be built from scratch, thus ignoring local power configurations. The Afghanistan Compact of 2006 highlighted that security could not be achieved by military means alone; it required good governance, justice and the rule of law, reinforced by reconstruction and development.

Currently, the Afghan constitution is a sticking point for the Taliban who see it as imposed on a Muslim society, while civil society has voiced concerns about the possible omission of democratic institutions and women's rights should negotiations about a power-sharing arrangement be pursued seriously. Such power-sharing would likely involve sharing of security arrangements, too, with the Taliban remaining in charge of regions where they are holding power, which points towards further fragmentation of the Afghan state. Whether Afghanistan's competing elites will be able to agree on an approach to peace with the Taliban remains questionable; consideration of other armed actors besides the government, the Taliban and Islamic State is crucial. Further, the country has been at the receiving end of a fragmented aid community that seems to prioritise maintaining its own channels of influence over aid effectiveness through better coordination. Several donors have evaluated their engagement in Afghanistan to learn and document these lessons. It remains to be seen whether future interventions can be different.

1   Introduction

Failure is a dominant narrative in analyses of interventions in Afghanistan. Despite recent successes – increased life expectancy or access to education – the conclusion is invariably a failure to achieve the broader goals of building peace and establishing a democratic state. A litany of reports evaluating development assistance emphasise that mistakes, repeated year after year, have contributed to these failures. A variety of actors have made different errors at multiple points and for different reasons, but the broad pattern is clear:

1. Lack of familiarity with, and understanding of, Afghan society and politics, including social dynamics and conflict.

2. The exclusion of key actors from negotiated settlements.

3. Unrealistic timelines, budgets and objectives for accomplishing large-scale social change.

4. The competing interests and agendas of external powers.

Variations of these four points are used to explain the failure of half a dozen rounds of national peace talks since the Soviet invasion in 1979. The same reasons are often cited for the failure of the international community to develop institutions critical to democracy and sustainable peace.

Due to the abundance of failed interventions, the literature focuses predominantly on understanding the approaches that have been most damaging, rather than successes that can be translated into best practice. These evaluations, while discouraging to read, do an excellent job of tracing the challenges, mistakes, and ultimate failures in detail, often with strong empirical support.

This paper sets out to explore key findings from this literature. Chapter 2 provides an overview of national peace talks, beginning with the National Reconciliation Process under President Mohammad Najibullah in the mid-1980s, and reviewing lessons from the Geneva Accords, the Peshawar Accords, the Bonn Agreement and talks in Pakistan and Qatar. Chapter 3 looks at the implications of these lessons for inclusion, rights, governance and security. Chapter 4 examines the application of lessons learned within development and humanitarian agendas, and chapter 5 provides an overview of donor lessons learned reports. While the first half of the paper focuses on what policy-makers can learn from past efforts to support national peace talks and an inclusive peace process, the latter half emphasises how international actors can support initiatives that create and maintain an environment conducive to sustainable peace, focusing on security, governance and aid.

2 Lessons from political negotiations, peace talks and peace processes

2.1 The pre-Taliban era

Over the past four decades there have been multiple rounds of negotiations and peace talks, beginning with Soviet negotiations with the Mujahedeen in the 1980s. These talks yielded important concessions from Mohammad Najibullah's government, including a unilateral ceasefire, the revision of the Afghan constitution, the release of thousands of prisoners and the provision of half of the seats in a government of national reconciliation for Mujahedeen. Archived correspondence between the Soviet military command and the Central Committee of the Soviet Union highlights many of the same concerns regarding peace and reconciliation that the country faces today, notably:

1. Despite attempts at an inclusive and bottom-up reconciliation process, it was unclear what level of support there was for the peace talks, or even for conceptual reconciliation, within the broader population, Mujahedeen groups and key actors in the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA).

2. The Mujahedeen were aware of the intended Soviet troop withdrawal and would 'not be satisfied with partial power today, knowing that tomorrow it can have it all' (Yazov, 1987).

3. The Soviets could conceive of power-sharing with certain actors but not others; there was no plan to deal with individuals seen as too extreme to bring into the political fold (ibid.).

4. There was significant concern for the morale of Afghan troops and fears of mass desertions, which were occurring in increasing numbers by the mid-1980s (ibid.).

The Najibullah-led National Reconciliation Process failed for numerous reasons. The Geneva Accords and reconciliation process created waves of dissent within the party, whose members were concerned that Najibullah was giving way to reactionary mullahs and feudal landlords and 'selling out the revolution' (Giustozzi, 2000). Concessions were indeed being made. At the Congress of July 1990, the PDPA rebranded itself Hizb-e Watan, or the Party of the Homeland, and adopted platforms stating that all members must be Muslim, live according to Sharia and support the reconciliation effort. The party had little control of rural areas when Soviet troops were stationed there, but once they were withdrawn government outposts were overrun, greatly diminishing Kabul's reach. To counter this, Najibullah began offering land to individuals joining the party, and de facto autonomy to tribal leaders who agreed to expel Mujahedeen and pay taxes. Tempting as this offer may have seemed, for rural peasants reconciliation was redundant since the Soviet withdrawal marked the cessation of jihad. For community leaders, to join forces with a government that might crumble at any point was irrational; fence-sitting made more strategic sense (Giustozzi, 2000).

In 1988, Afghanistan and Pakistan signed the First Geneva Accord, centred on a regional political arrangement premised on

non-interference and non-intervention (Saikal and Maley, 1989). The language of the agreement focused on respect for sovereignty, urging each party to refrain from supporting 'rebellious' or 'secessionist' activities against the other (Heela, 2018). They also promised to stop building training camps and equipping 'mercenaries' and 'terrorists' (Saikal and Maley, 1989). Subsequently, the United States and the Soviet Union signed the Second Geneva Accord as guarantors, and undertook to cease their interference in Afghan and Pakistani affairs. The third accord was a bilateral agreement between Afghanistan and Pakistan regarding the voluntary return of Afghan refugees from Pakistan, and the fourth formally established the agreed terms of Soviet troop withdrawal. Shortly after the accords were signed, Afghanistan and Pakistan each complained to the United Nations (UN) of breaches by the other party, with Pakistan continuing to support the Mujahedeen, who refused to accept the terms of the accords from which they had been excluded, as well as interfering in the diplomatic efforts of Najibullah's regime (Sciolino, 1987). The accords were problematic from the outset: the second was labelled a 'declaration' rather than a bilateral agreement, meaning that it did not entail mutual treaty obligations, and terms such as 'foreign troops' were never defined, leading the Soviet Union to dispatch thousands of newly rebranded 'advisors' to Afghanistan following the formal withdrawal of troops (Saikal and Maley, 1989). 'Mercenaries', 'terrorists' or 'saboteurs' were also undefined within the terms of the accords, allowing legal scholars to argue that the Mujahedeen, framed as 'national liberators', were precluded from the obligations of the agreements (Reisman, 1987).

The Soviet Union began to collapse shortly after the Geneva accords, and international efforts to support peace in Afghanistan collapsed along with it. With the US the only superpower left on the UN Security Council, the focus switched from supporting an Afghan-led reconciliation process to simply replacing the communist leadership in Kabul (Najibullah, 2018).

Ultimately, peace failed because it was designed and orchestrated by national and international elites, and excluded key local actors. At no point was there sustained, consistent support from regional or international powers; instead, each continued to support particular actors based on their own national interests (Najibullah, 2018). Finally, actual and projected military outcomes led many parties to the conflict to believe that a military victory was possible, reducing interest in a negotiated settlement (ibid.; Semple, 2009). These concerns will all be deeply familiar to those engaged in current peace talks and reconciliation efforts.

2.2 Talks with the Taliban pre- and post-9/11

The US first made diplomatic overtures to the Taliban shortly after they took Kabul in 1996. The US Ambassador to Pakistan Thomas Simons initiated talks with the Taliban Foreign Minister, Mullah Ghaus, to press the new government to deny Afghanistan as a safe haven for Al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups (Ruben, 2010). Talks continued under Secretary of State Madeleine Albright at multiple levels with a view to persuading the Taliban to hand over Osama bin Laden, close terrorist training camps and provide basic human rights to Afghan citizens (Thiessen, 2013). Declassified documents reveal that the Taliban not only promised to close the camps but also offered tours to Western diplomats to demonstrate this. No tours ever took place. Some commentators use these failed negotiations to argue that the Taliban are incapable of negotiating in good faith, having repeatedly reneged on past promises (Rubin, 2019).

Most analysis of Taliban negotiations focuses on the post-9/11 period, beginning with attempts to negotiate the capture of bin Laden and the subsequent diplomatic failures that led to the development of the Taliban insurgency (Gopal, 2017). Staggering US success on the battlefield in 2001 led to the rapid collapse of the Taliban government and the attempted surrender of several key leaders (Jackson, 2016). However, the inflexibility of American political and military strategy to accommodate those Taliban who attempted surrender meant that opportunities were missed for an early negotiated settlement with the movement (Gall, 2014).

The refusal to enter into dialogue with the Taliban extended to the international conference

that established the Bonn Agreement in 2002. Surkhe argues that the 'parameters of the Bonn talks were largely determined by the US overriding post-9/11 concern of denying Afghan territory to terrorists – al-Qaeda and their Taliban hosts. The political logic of the Bonn process, to negotiate a stable polity, was subordinate to the military, to remove the terrorist threat' (Larson and Ramsbotham, 2018). The agreement established the foundations for the future Afghan government: its constitution and configuration and key decisions about power-sharing. The talks also explicitly created the conditions for the return to power of pre-Taliban politicians. Many former Mujahedeen came to control important regions or cabinet posts, and still dominate the government today. In other words, prioritising US security interests meant not only excluding the Taliban, but also placing their old enemies in key positions of military and political power. This was a critical point in creating the conditions for the Taliban insurgency (Larson and Ramsbotham, 2018).

In 2010, US diplomat Richard Holbrooke began secret talks with the Taliban leadership, timed by the Obama administration to coincide with a military surge. While the details of these negotiations remain classified, the timeline of the military campaign (with its intended drawdown announced in the same speech that announced the surge) ensured a very short timeline for negotiations (Coll, 2011). Although Holbrooke died before he was able to broker peace, the problems with these talks mirrored those led by Najibullah. The problem lay partly in the unrealistically short timeframe, but was predominantly related to the psychological impact created by foreknowledge of the military drawdown. What Dmitry Yazov, the last Marshal of the Soviet Union, observed about the Mujahedeen in 1987 was just as applicable to the Taliban in 2010: 'They will not be satisfied with partial power today, knowing that tomorrow they can have it all' (Yazov, 1987).

On 7 July 2015, representatives of the Afghan government and the Taliban met in Murree in Pakistan. Accounts differ as to who orchestrated these talks, and what each party believed they were agreeing to (Borhan, 2015). Following the first round, the Afghan government leaked

that Mullah Omar, the leader of the Taliban, had died two years earlier in Pakistan. Reasons for the leak are disputed, but some believe the government was hoping to divide the insurgency and increase the pressure on the Taliban to sue for peace (Kumar, 2015). While the talks were divisive from the outset, the news of Mullah Omar's death did indeed create a major schism in the Taliban movement, increasing fragmentation and conflict between factions and reducing opportunities for future talks. The new Commander of the Faithful was named as Mullah Akhtar Mansur, but divisions in the ranks led to the creation of a splinter group led by Mullah Mohammad Rasul (BBC, 2015). Neither recognised the legitimacy of the other. It is also likely that the experience in Murree diminished hopes that Pakistan could broker peace talks. That Mullah Omar had reportedly died in a hospital in Karachi substantiated claims that Pakistan was supporting the Taliban leadership, while the Afghan government's leak of this information revealed the degree of mistrust between Kabul and Islamabad. Journalist and author Bette Dam recently argued that Mullah Omar had lived and died in Afghanistan a short walk from a US base, which, if true, adds yet more intrigue to the story of the Taliban's leadership (Dam, 2019).

Most critiques of Afghan peace processes focus on problematic approaches to high-level negotiations. However, an additional literature, mostly emanating from civil society, peace-building organisations and the press, focuses on the neglect of bottom-up approaches (Jung and Alvarado Cobar, 2019). With few exceptions, civil society, and particularly marginalised groups, have been systematically excluded from peace talks. When civil society and marginalised groups are included, this involvement is often symbolic and hollow. Many Afghan NGOs are run by or affiliated with politicians, and have been able to take advantage of proximity to the halls of power to procure projects. Many NGOs have thus become conduits for rent-seeking behaviour, with their agendas dictated by those in power. Therefore, far from a romantic image of bottom-up, community-driven development, the reality of the Afghan NGO sector is a distinctly top-down reality.

Lessons learned

Who to engage?

Key actors

Exclusion of key actors in power-sharing arrangements has previously created conditions for continued violence.

Exclusion of the Taliban post-2001 is considered a key factor in the Taliban's resurgence.

The system of government in Afghanistan is not designed for opposition politics.
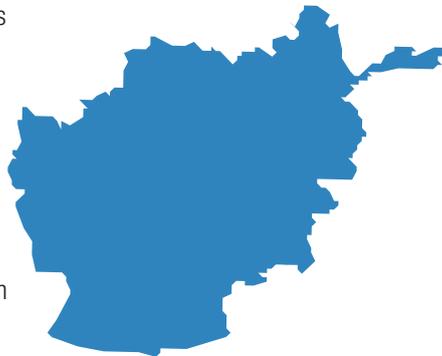
> Inclusion of key actors is essential to a sustainable peace process (Larson and Ramsbotham, 2018) – recognition of this led to the creation of a power-sharing National Unity Government in 2014.

Civil society

Local

> Support from the top is critical but not sufficient; civil society must be included in the peace process.
>
> Transparency allows civil society to identify and articulate the agendas of non-elite actors, whose support is important in encouraging public support for a peace process (Lieven, 2019).
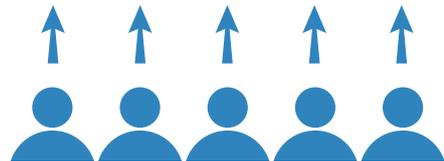
External

External actors – notably Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, India and the US – are crucial to prevent continual spoiling. Currently, all of these actors have an interest in the continuation of hostilities for their own ends (Larson and Ramsbotham, 2018), therefore any peace process designed by these powers and guided by their own national interests risks replicating mistakes from the Bonn Agreement, creating a settlement that is ultimately based on foreign interests and detrimental to peace in Afghanistan (Berdal and Suhrke, 2018).

How to engage?

1. Start with a good grasp of context and actors

A successful negotiation is predicated on understanding the actors and conflict cleavages (Gopal, 2017; Martin, 2014). The importance of local and contextual understanding should extend to peace process strategies that draw on Afghan cultural heritage (Semple, 2009).

Context: It is important to understand power dynamics, and where and how local conflicts overlap with broader conflict cleavages.
It is not only the Taliban we must understand; government-controlled areas of the country rest in the hands of elite networks.
How the international community interacts with these networks is critical to ensuring that a brokered peace can be achieved and maintained (Jackson, 2018).

Actors: Knowledge about the Taliban movement is critical, but it has been largely understudied (Jackson, 2018).

There is no agreement on whether the movement is a monolithic entity, centralised and hierarchical, or fragmented and dependent on equally fragmented local support (Staniland, 2014; Baczko, 2013); the debate about fragmentation may be more political than valuable, but understanding the group, who they represent and how they operate is critical (Farrell and Semple, 2015).

Poor understanding has repercussions for how to engage and assess ability to carry out any actions that have been outlined in a peace agreement.

One key lesson is to rely on subject matter and area expertise over more generalised peace process expertise, and to invest more heavily in high-quality research on the armed actors engaged in the conflict.

2. Design the approach as realistically as possible

The most important lesson, repeated throughout the literature, is to ensure adequate time – a peace process cannot be rushed.
The most recent talks have been charcterised by haste – the Bonn Agreement, negotiations surrounding the surge and the development of the National Unity Government were all rushed by the external actors brokering them, with deeply problematic consequences.
In recent talks, which have already collapsed, US Special Representative Zalmay Khalilzad mentioned the need for speed in finalising talks in Doha; this raised concerns among observers of past talks, who emphasise that success relies on approaching the process as a marathon, not a sprint (van Biljert, 2018).

3. The context is fluid, and the process long, therefore a feedback mechanism is critical

A keen grasp of the actors and context is a fleeting concept.
Power shifts, leaders die and alliances are strategic (Fotini, 2012), so learning must continue, and be incorporated, throughout the entire length of the engagement.
A flexible process that allows for evolution in response to shifting dynamics on the ground is key.
Equally important is a functional feedback mechanism to allow new information to flow into that evolution in a timely manner.

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3 Implications for inclusion, rights, governance and security

3.1 Overview

Much of the literature discussing how international donors identified funding priorities emerges from programme evaluations of the surge years from 2009 to 2012. These include large US Agency for International Development (USAID) evaluations of stabilisation programming as well as publications from the World Bank and UN seeking to understand intervention outcomes as they relate to the nexus of peace, governance and security (Iyengar et al., 2017; Hogg et al., 2013). The fieldwork for these publications was carried out between 2010 and 2016, and key dynamics relating to a potential peace process have since changed. Between 2016 and 2019, the US government stopped measuring district control, a tacit nod to the fact that the Taliban is likely to control or contest more territory than the government, providing leverage to the Taliban in any negotiation (Zucchino, 2019). A two-year delay in holding parliamentary elections was just one of the outcomes of a deeply problematic power-sharing agreement between President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, which is widely believed to have deepened political fragmentation at all levels of Afghan politics (Jackson, 2016).

Many key insights from the literature repeat the lessons of publications on the Afghan intervention over 15 years (see Table 1). Many of these lessons will be well-known to anyone familiar with Afghanistan, and frustrating to read yet again. However, it is important to internalise them as planning for support to a 'post-settlement'

Afghanistan gets under way. It is likely that new initiatives to support the Afghan state will emulate past efforts, and it will be critical not to repeat past mistakes that have contributed to a corrupt and ineffective government reliant on foreign funding for its existence. This dynamic has been exacerbated by the establishment of a parallel system of government staffed with expensive, usually foreign, technical assistants working on short-term time frames, and ultimately undermined government capacity and legitimacy. Any further support must be planned on the basis of long-term engagement, well-coordinated and with an exit strategy built in (Blum et al., 2019).

3.2 Constitutional reform and the inclusion and participation of marginalised groups

The Afghan constitution is a key sticking point for the Taliban, who dismiss it as 'invalid, copied from the West, imposed on a Muslim society, and arbitrarily implemented' (Haress, 2019). For their part, civil society has been active and vocal in the media regarding its concerns about what a new Taliban-led constitution would do to democratic institutions and the rights of women and other marginalised groups. Civil society actors agree that these rights are not yet effectively enforced, but prefer theoretical rights to none (Safi and Muqaddesa, 2019). The Taliban will most likely seek to redraft the constitution, or at the very least will require a symbolic name change from the Islamic Republic to the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, to represent a clean break with

Table 1   Key insights from the literature on Afghan intervention over the past 15 years

	The mistake	The lesson
The *tabula rasa* approach	The international community considered Afghanistan a blank slate upon which new, modern and efficient government structures and institutions could be erected. In so doing, the architecture of the 'new state' neglected pre-conflict legacies and political and social dynamics, to the detriment of state-building goals (Blum et al., 2019; Jackson, 2016).	This lesson is relevant to international support for any 'post-conflict' state. Any peace agreement or plan for institutional support post-settlement must be developed based on current structural realities, rather than relying on the notion of a blank canvas upon which to paint a new state into existence.
Chronic short-termism	The international community consistently developed programmes and policies with time frames measured in months or, at most, a few years. An oft-repeated criticism of both the military and civilian side of the American intervention is that it has comprised 18 one-year interventions rather than a single long-term plan. This is particularly problematic for the creation of things as complex as governance structures and institutions (Blum et al., 2019; Jackson, 2016).	Talks in Doha were framed by the media as highly promising, depicting the potential for a deal in the short term. Peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC rebel group went on for four years before coming to a preliminary agreement. Any international support to ongoing talks must bear in mind that this process is a marathon not a sprint, and plan accordingly (van Biljert, 2018). This same lesson is equally applicable to any peacemaking work carried out post-agreement.
Lack of policy coherence	State-building interventions in Afghanistan were often conducted by diverse actors and without coordination, precluding the policy coherence necessary to develop governance institutions. This helped nurture corruption and increase inequality, pushing elites to hedge their bets rather than participate in institutional development. This has meant that, while foreign powers were funding governance programmes, they were simultaneously undermining their own efforts (Jackson, 2016).	Policy coherence is critical if foreign powers are to play a role in negotiating a political settlement in Afghanistan. If engaged as neutral third parties to broker negotiations and build trust between the Taliban and the Afghan government, there cannot be competing policy interests behind the scenes. The US, Pakistan, China, Russia, India and the Gulf states are also potential spoilers to the central conflict cleavage, as well as smaller peripheral ones, and policy coherence between these actors is necessary for an effective peace (Lieven, 2019).
Lack of oversight	Problematic throughout the intervention, the inability to effectively monitor and evaluate projects became acute following the drawdown of troops and diminished international funding in 2013. Most embassy staff were restricted to compounds and could not visit implementing partners in Kabul, let alone projects in the field. In 2015 an audit of USAID projects found that, out of 127 awards, only one met the rigorous M&E criteria required by the agency (Office of the Inspector General, 2015).	Without ensuring that technical and financial support is reaching intended recipients, foreign 'support' risks doing more harm than good. It is often blamed for fuelling corruption, deepening inequality and warping markets and the broader economy, all of which serve to exacerbate conflict dynamics (Chayes, 2016). Any international support to peace or development should be limited to what actors can realistically ensure is implemented responsibly, including effective monitoring and evaluating of all activities.

post-2001 political regimes and to establish their own constitutional legitimacy. Constitutional change may also be more important for its symbolism as many of the Taliban's complaints about the document – that it is not sufficiently Islamic and too vague – are arguably unfounded (Haress, 2019). Other complaints – that the constitutional process was invalid and imposed from outside – were also expressed by scholars and think tanks during and subsequent to the document's ratification (International Crisis Group, 2003). In 2002–2003, the International Crisis Group (ICG) recommended slowing down the process to ensure enough time for adequate public consultation, publishing drafts to ensure a transparent process and supporting public debate to ensure broad participation, including marginalised voices. A 2015 report by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) suggests that a middle ground of constitutional reform could provide the Taliban with the legitimacy they seek, while also challenging the movement to justify some of the more unpopular changes being promoted (Kane, 2015).

3.3 Participation of Afghan security actors and institutions

A RAND report on the prospects of a peace deal from the 'surge' years foresaw the need for the demobilisation of inflated state forces (Shinn and Dobbins, 2011). Most peace plans, from the invasion until very recently, also included the demobilisation and disarmament of Taliban fighters as a starting point. It is now agreed that this would be suicide for Taliban fighters, who would become the targets of retributive attacks, making it an inconceivable starting point for talks (Lieven, 2019). In addition, based on negotiations thus far, it is clear that the Taliban would never agree to a process of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR). Lieven argues that the Taliban cannot disarm, but equally cannot be easily folded into the military; instead, he suggests a political–military power-sharing arrangement whereby the Taliban assume control of security for the key regions where they already hold the greatest power: Kandahar, Paktia and Kunduz (ibid.). Anti-Taliban elites living in these regions would be forced to flee or be killed, while those in their patronage networks would be compelled to submit to Taliban authority (ibid.). Such a settlement more closely resembles an armed truce, as in Bosnia and Lebanon, than a peace agreement. A risk with this approach is greater fragmentation of the Afghan state, with yet further negative implications for service delivery (Di John et al., 2017). Given the weakness of existing state institutions, it is advisable to rethink the institutions themselves rather than simply trying to integrate the Taliban into one or another system.

3.4 Buy-in with an elite deal

Broad popular support for the details of any peace agreement is highly unlikely. The social and political fabric of Afghanistan is characterised by competing elite interests, whereby 'regional elite networks, and the system as a whole, have created and sustain "durable disorders" at the subnational level, stitched together through network ties to resemble the centralised government laid out in the Afghan constitution' (Jackson, 2016). Even a lengthy and concerted effort to integrate public consultation into a peace agreement is unlikely to change the political dynamics that have dominated the Afghan state since its inception. This does not invalidate the value of such an initiative, but it does reemphasise the importance of buy-in from elite networks, as excluded actors may become important spoilers. Both the Afghan government and the Taliban comprise coalitions, the more peripheral elements of which are vehemently opposed to a peace deal and power-sharing. Leiven warns that, in a worst-case scenario, more hard-line Taliban will defect and join Islamic State in Afghanistan (IS), while hard-line Tajiks from the state security apparatus may break away to form their own political and military faction (Lieven, 2019).

The constellations of authority also encompass a great many more armed actors than the government, IS and the Taliban. Thousands of men belong to local militias or the Afghan Local Police (ALP), a 'cheap but dangerous' force created to respond to short-term security requirements (International Crisis Group, 2015). These groups are probably not easily integrated into any future system and may instead roam freely, threatening peace and shifting power dynamics among elite networks.

4 Lessons from development and humanitarian programmes

The lessons from development and humanitarian programmes mirror many of those set out in chapters 2 and 3. The international community cycled through multiple policy paradigms over nearly two decades of intervention, which are described in the sections below. An oft-repeated trope is that Afghanistan would have benefited from a coherent 18-year plan; instead, there have been 18 one-year plans, from multiple external actors, often with conflicting goals. Although the proliferation of donors and implementing agencies brought diversity, parallel delivery systems have contributed to poor aid effectiveness and weakened governance.

In the early days, funds were pledged but never committed. When funds were finally committed, they were funnelled through parallel channels that often circumvented the Afghan government. Some policy approaches, such as US counterinsurgency doctrine, involved the military taking on humanitarian and development responsibilities, militarising aid and making development more dangerous for civilian workers.

Certain sectors progressed more effectively than others. Education has improved significantly, with nine times the number of students enrolled than in 2001, and 40% of students are female. However, despite enormous funding and development in the justice sector, access to state justice remains so limited today that many Afghans choose Taliban courts to resolve disputes.

Finally, civilian oversight of the security forces remains a considerable challenge. Thousands of members of the ALP, militias and non-state armed groups are subject to no oversight whatsoever. State security is predominantly funded by foreign powers, as the national security budget represents roughly 50% of Afghan GDP. Despite extensive training and funding of state security forces, the government is still losing territory to the Taliban, and to a smaller extent other armed groups such as IS.

4.1 Establishing legitimate institutions and delivering governance

Following the collapse of the Taliban government, the international community filled the vacuum with a maximalist model of post-conflict reconstruction based on lessons from contexts such as the Balkans and East Timor (Mukhopadhyay, 2009; Kulakov, 2006; Payind, 1989). The evolution of language employed since 2001 illustrates the paradigm shift in how the international community viewed its role in Afghanistan, from 'state-building' and 'failed state' to 'winning hearts and minds' to more wizened and pragmatic 'hybrid' or 'conditions-based' approaches (Henriksen, 2012; Beath et al., 2012; Clark, 2004; Department of Defense, 2018). One early mistake was the assumption that institution-building needed to start from scratch, despite the existence of thousands of former civil servants who could have been harnessed and empowered to steer the process. Early post-intervention literature pointed to growing recognition of an aid–conflict–peace nexus, in which development and humanitarian aid were refashioned into tools for promoting security (Goodhand, 2002).

The Bonn Agreement of 2002 set benchmarks for political action and interim administration, and timelines for the establishment of more representative government. Many analysts argued that early tensions between supporters of a strong parliamentary system and advocates of a presidential one weakened the already narrow political base (International Crisis Group, 2002; Adeney, 2008). Some argue that the rushed establishment of the Bonn Agreement, Emergency Loya Jirga[1] and Constitutional Loya Jirga set the stage for what became a patrimonial, corrupt and ineffective form of government (Saikal, 2012). The literature from this period decried the rampant corruption that permeated the new political and economic order established by the international intervention, but the most pervasive threat was understood to be insecurity (Cramer and Goodhand, 2002; Rubin et al., 2004). Emphasis was placed on DDR, but these efforts failed because the Afghan government and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) did not control sufficient territory to entice insurgents to lay down their arms. In nominally government-controlled areas of northern and western Afghanistan, powerbrokers balked at proposals for disarmament (Selber, 2018; Hartzell, 2011).

Following early donor conferences, gaps emerged between funds committed and spent. Additionally, some $29 billion of the $62 billion pledged in 2002 bypassed the new government's core budget system through an external budget, underscoring the lack of trust in Hamid Karzai's administration and undermining its capacity to engage in development work (McCloskey et al., 2015). More than half the donor funds pledged for reconstruction were channelled through the military, most prominently through Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) (Petřik, 2016).[2] PRTs were widely regarded as tools of occupation, their effectiveness in delivering development was questioned and they created security dilemmas for humanitarian actors engaged in the same communities, since all

external development actors could easily be associated with the military occupation (Brinkley, 2013; Zia-Zarifi, 2004). An emphasis on quick-impact projects undermined the longer-term objectives of international donors and increased tensions between the government and NGOs, which regarded themselves as better qualified than the PRTs to engage in development and humanitarian interventions (Saikal, 2012).

The Afghanistan Compact that emerged from the 2006 London Conference established a vision for the future of the country, including detailed outcomes, benchmarks and timelines, for both the government and the international community through to the end of 2010. Security was a central tenet, but it was understood that it could not be achieved by military means alone; it required good governance, justice and the rule of law, reinforced by reconstruction and development (NATO, 2006).

The National Solidarity Program (NSP) sought to foster support for the transitional government by engaging communities in the development process. Funded by the World Bank and a consortium of bilateral donors, the programme tried to harness community-driven development to improve rural Afghans' access to services and create the institutions for village governance via community development councils (CDCs). Inarguably, the first phase of the NSP achieved several successes. It substantially improved access to drinking water and electricity, and services including healthcare, education and counselling for women (Beath et al., 2015). However, as argued by Bhatia, Jareer and McIntosh, while the NSP was relatively effective at delivering aid, it was relatively ineffective at institutional development as the CDCs were unable to change de facto village leadership structures (Shaw, 2010; Bhatia et al., 2018). Nor did it significantly improve public perceptions of the government, a problem exacerbated by overlapping and unclear institutional roles (World Bank Group, 2013; Beath et al., 2012; Bhatia et al., 2018). The creation of parallel institutions undermined

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1   'Grand assembly' in Pashto.

2   PRTs were military command bases first introduced in 2002. They generally included civilian aid, diplomatic personnel and reporting staff.

local governance and faith in the central government's capacity to deliver services. As the second phase of the NSP coincided with the withdrawal of much of the international military presence in 2014, the programme faced increased instability and opposition from local elites who felt threatened by its goals (World Bank Group, 2013; Beath et al., 2012; Bhatia et al., 2018).

4.2 Challenges to effective service delivery in 'post-conflict' contexts

In terms of service delivery, development interventions have seen widely varying success sector by sector. The education sector has been the most demonstrably successful. The number of children attending school has increased from fewer than one million in 2001 to over nine million today. Of these, the proportion of female students has increased from roughly 10% to 40% (USAID, 2019). After 2001, much of the literature pertaining to gender and development pointed to the need to target rural women through reconstruction, skills training, income supplementation and eventually economic empowerment (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003). A decade later, with women still largely excluded from public life, the emphasis switched to the need to identify best practices in programming (Kuehnast et al., 2012).

Vanda Felbab-Brown identifies four potential inflection points where the international community and the Afghan government could have fundamentally shifted the future trajectory of outcomes following initial pragmatic choices in 2001 about informal power distribution and its ties to criminality: first, the 2004 disarmament effort; second, the Obama administration's surge; third, the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG) in 2014 – whose two protagonists, Ghani and Abdullah, campaigned on an anti-corruption platform; and fourth, the Taliban takeover of Kunduz City in October 2015 (Felbab-Brown, 2017). Felbab-Brown argues that, rather than address widespread corruption, the NUG allowed it to blossom to such an extent that

theft of revenues hampered the functioning of the government (ibid.). With a view to improving donor perceptions of the administration in the lead-up to Brussels 2016,[3] the government was able to turn this trend around – from a dip of 8% in revenue in 2014 to an increase of 22% in 2015 (Byrd, 2015). However, addressing systemic corruption through President Ghani's attempts to directly oversee contracting has been hampered by the strength of ethnic enmities and competing patronage networks. It has been argued that the international community focused too much on the wrong kind of illicit economy and criminality: the labour-intensive opium cultivation that underpins much of the country's economy. Instead, it has been argued that the focus should have been on predatory criminality and non-labour-intensive transactional crimes such as drug smuggling (Felbab-Brown, 2017). Other analysts have drawn attention to the challenge of delivering effective aid interventions in the context of the intensive risk management and remote programming that have become the norm in Afghanistan (Andersson and Weigand, 2015).

4.3 Addressing long-term justice issues

While it was understood early on that rising levels of organised crime and corruption required a strong and transparent police and judiciary, political negotiations in fact legitimised war criminals and set the wrong tone for justice delivery in Afghanistan (Qaane and Kuovo, 2019; OECD, 2005). Rule of law initiatives did not bolster peace-building efforts, and the international community arguably failed to understand legal pluralism, in which two or more legal systems can coexist. Just as state courts and village shuras coexist, so Taliban justice successfully asserted itself in the void created by government corruption and lack of capacity (Swenson, 2017). Jackson's analysis of Afghans' encounters with Taliban justice is a telling illustration of how the movement has been able to fill a services gap using a combination

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3   The underwriting of initial investments through a risk guarantee for firms willing to compete for government licences as part of a joint government and international community initiative is held up as a success story that spawned a burgeoning telecoms sector and had demonstrable flow-on effects for the country's development (Freschi, 2010).

of strategy, opportunism and ideology (Jackson, 2018). In this context of multiple justice providers, there have been increasing calls to institutionalise a hybrid model of justice (Larson and Ramsbotham, 2018).

4.4 Civilian oversight of the security forces

As violence spread from 2007 onwards, civilian oversight was highlighted as key to security sector reform (Ayub et al., 2009). This was regarded as even more important by 2014, when several police chiefs began issuing 'take no prisoners' orders, underscoring the lack of oversight of or consequences for what was essentially a paramilitary force (Bezhan, 2014). This was compounded by growing revelations of financial irregularities among the Afghan National Police (ANP) (Conger, 2014). In 2015, the Special Inspector General for Afghan Reconstruction (SIGAR) uncovered an attempted $215 million fraud involving the Afghan Ministry of Defence (Maharaj, 2015).

In early 2019, it was widely reported that more Afghan civilians were killed by government than by anti-government forces (Graham-Harrision, 2019). This has served to underscore the need for more emphasis on civilian oversight of the armed forces as a core pillar of the overall international development undertaking (NATO, 2018).

5 Lessons and implications for peace-building donorship

5.1 Over- and underfunding development and donor financial mismanagement

The chronic pathologies in the modus operandi of donor-driven aid in Afghanistan were well elaborated in a 2008 report by Oxfam, which identified over 30 different donors disbursing aid without effective coordination, and bypassing the Afghan government (Waldman, 2008). Building on this evaluation, a report by Oxfam and the Swedish Committee for Afghanistan (SCA) found that, despite significant increases in domestic revenue generation, two-thirds of Afghanistan's budget was still being funded by international donors (Swedish Committee for Afghanistan, 2018). According to the report, 40% of development aid was channelled through the government's core budget in 2015, and 59% in 2016.

Donors mainly channel money through projects they run or through trust funds such as the Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), the single largest source of on-budget financing for education, health, infrastructure and rural development (Afghan Reconstruction Trust Fund, 2019). An evaluation of SIDA support to Afghanistan points to a lack of government ownership of the ARTF as problematic, since programming decisions are made by the World Bank, and local agendas are therefore donor-driven rather than community-driven (Pain et al., 2015).

Several analyses have highlighted how this approach to budgeting has resulted in 'over-aiding' the country due to the allocation of more funds than needed over multiple budget cycles (SCA, 2018; Bjelica and Ruttig, 2018). This should be a core issue when strategising the future vision for donor intervention in Afghanistan. Another issue highlighted in the Oxfam–SCA report was the manner in which aid fragmentation combined with competing and mismatched agendas led to poor development outcomes. The Afghan government has a clear plan laid out in the National Priority Programs, but donors compete for the most attractive projects, leaving unappealing or less marketable areas neglected (Ministry of Finance, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2019; SCA, 2018; Bjelica and Ruttig, 2018).

A 2016 SIGAR report was strongly critical of the US government for funnelling billions of dollars of aid funds without adequate oversight, and argued that this had not only undermined the US mission by fuelling corruption, but had also allowed aid to become a driver of further conflict (SIGAR, 2016). These criticisms came as public support for international involvement was waning, and as the cost of the war was becoming widely understood (Department of Defense, 2018; Crawford, 2018). A subsequent 2018 SIGAR report concluded that, overall, international military and development interventions have been a failure; that expectations about what could be achieved were unrealistic in the timeline set out; and that US government agencies lacked the capacity to support their stated efforts in the time frames given.

The most telling antagonism was between US military and development actors, largely because the military campaign was much better resourced and more influential than civilian development efforts. US Commander Stanley McChrystal conceded in 2009 that the emphasis on military solutions led to the neglect of efforts to develop effective governance (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2009). Since the withdrawal of NATO forces in 2014, military analysts have echoed this, and also criticised the unbalanced and awkwardly planned cooperation between military and civilian actors, as well as misguided attempts to win 'hearts and minds' through 'quick-impact projects' (Gjørv, 2019; Fishstein and Wilder, 2012). Analysis of the interplay between aid and security has raised questions around the outcomes of counterinsurgency and stabilisation strategies in increasing public support for the Afghan government through development and humanitarian interventions stewarded by PRTs (Gordon, 2011; Egnell, 2011).

5.2   Country lessons

At this point, it is also worth noting that lesson-learning processes seem to have been much more thorough among militaries and defence analysts, while at the same time largely ignoring civilian aid perspectives, and driven by a desire to win battles rather than build a lasting peace.

For instance, a 2019 University of St Andrews Conference on lessons learned in Afghanistan was glaringly bereft of any input from civilian or Afghan representatives (University of St Andrews, 2019; Gjørv, 2019).

In this regard, several donor countries engaged in lesson learning processes after their military withdrawals, from both military and civilian perspectives. For instance, the Australian government produced a lessons learned document highlighting the challenges of engaging in humanitarian and development interventions in the context of military engagement, while also re-evaluating its donor relationship with Afghanistan (University of St Andrews, 2019; Gjørv, 2019; Australian Government Civil–Military Centre, 2016). The report also called for stronger civilian leadership of international missions to ensure a greater focus on 'whole of government' policy, rather than allowing missions to be steered solely by military objectives (Australian Government Civil–Military Centre, 2016).

Likewise, Norway produced a comprehensive evaluation of its involvement in the international intervention in Afghanistan, which concluded that, given the difficulties of delivering aid effectively in fragile and violent contexts, it would be better to focus on fewer, locally driven projects than on too ambitious a level of external aid when its effectiveness cannot be reasonably or safely ascertained.

6 Conclusions

6.1 Peace talks

1. Inclusivity is vital. Past efforts in Afghanistan have failed because of the exclusion of actors deemed 'irreconcilable'. Outside powers refused to engage with the Taliban at multiple points early on in the conflict, when negotiating conditions were significantly more favourable. The movement now controls growing areas of the country, and has few incentives to concede anything to the government in Kabul, let alone to foreign governments.

Other voices are marginalised owing to the limited perceived value of their contribution. Civil society must be better included, ensuring that the voices of youth, women, minority groups and activists are heard. Exclusion of the broader public, particularly rural populations, brings with it the risk of provoking the kind of popular discontent witnessed in Colombia in 2016 in response to exclusion from peace negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC).

2. Understanding both context and actors is a prerequisite. There is limited research on, and understanding of, most of the non-state armed groups engaged in the conflict in Afghanistan. Yet access is possible in order to generate insights into how these groups are interacting with both civilians and the state (Jackson, 2018). We should draw more heavily on subject and area expertise and invest in quality research on the armed actors involved in the conflict.

It is equally important to understand power dynamics, and where and how local conflicts overlap with broader cleavages. It is not only the Taliban we must understand; government-controlled areas of the country are in the hands of elite networks. How the international community interacts with those networks is critical to ensuring that peace can be achieved and maintained.

3. Foreign powers and agendas must not be allowed to dominate another negotiated settlement in Afghanistan. Currently the US, Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Iran and the Gulf States are all engaged in attempts to broker peace, presenting a considerable risk that the problems that arose during the National Reconciliation Policy and Bonn Agreement will be repeated.

4. There is no such thing as 'quick wins'. Peace negotiations cannot be based on foreign timelines or rushed for domestic political reasons. Lessons from past talks, in Afghanistan and elsewhere, emphasise that success relies on approaching the process as a marathon, not a sprint. This is equally applicable to development assistance.

6.2 Support to post-conflict peace

1. A narrower focus on fewer, more demonstrably successful projects is preferable to the overambitious, hard to measure, large-scale external aid Afghanistan has received. Delivering aid effectively in fragile and violent contexts such as Afghanistan is extremely difficult.

2. Integration does not mean forcing actors into the existing institutional framework. Most analyses struggle to understand where and how to insert armed groups into the state security forces. Perhaps, given the weakness of state institutions, it is advisable to rethink the institutions themselves.

3. Development policy must be coordinated and responsive to ground realities. Efforts to disburse development aid without coordination, especially bypassing the Afghan government, risk exacerbating corruption and increasing conflict. Bypassing local actors, government or NGOs makes exit impossible and efforts unsustainable.

4. There must be a realistic exit plan. As a result of intervention policies, Afghanistan is now critically dependent on development assistance. Every plan now developed must include a realistic exit strategy.

The few examples of developmental success emerging from the intervention in Afghanistan have failed to dislodge a pervasive narrative of failure. This is perhaps understandable. The stated goals of building peace and establishing a democratic state have not been achieved. However, the huge quantity of NGO reports, analyses and project evaluations, as well as the work of academics and the media, constitute an important, and cautionary, body of literature. Much of this research is both historically and empirically supported, underlining the problems encountered when the lessons of the past go unheeded.

Important research gaps remain, notably understanding the very actors with whom we seek to engage. However, by drawing on past research and experience, future development assistance can be better targeted. Such an approach brings a greater probability of success and, perhaps more importantly, avoids introducing more problems than solutions.

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