



Empowering dependency 10 years on in Afghanistan

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By Malou Innocent

After 10 years in Afghanistan, [military](#) and [civilian leaders](#) insist that Afghanistan must defend and govern itself, and yet they admit that the Afghan army and police will be ill prepared to take over by 2014 when combat forces withdraw.

But building security and governance to the point where locals can stand on their own is the back door to an indefinite presence. It's not an exit strategy.

The tens of billions of dollars the coalition has put into building physical infrastructure for Afghans goes well beyond the Afghan government's financial and technical capacity to sustain. A [detailed report](#) released in August by the independent, bipartisan Commission on Wartime Contracting found that the U.S. government contracted for dozens of clinics, barracks, hospitals, and other facilities that exceed Afghan funding capabilities.

One example was an \$82 million contract for the design and construction of an Afghan Defense University. Department of Defense officials now say it will cost \$40 million a year to operate — well outside the Afghan government's funding ability. Similar findings were uncovered by auditors at the Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR). One \$11.4 billion program to construct nearly 900 facilities for the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) — which includes the Afghan National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP) — is, [SIGAR concludes](#), “[A]t risk of building facilities that are inadequate or do not meet ANSF strategic and operational needs.” According to the Combined Security Transition Command, Afghanistan, which equips and trains the ANSF under the direction of U.S. Forces-Afghanistan, long-term operations, maintenance, and sustainment costs may continue through 2025.

In essence, the coalition has spent billions of dollars on projects that will cost billions in foreign aid dollars to sustain. But a complete picture of long-range problems must also include technical and managerial training for Afghan security forces.

Serious efforts to strengthen the ANSF really began in 2009. It is now about 10,000 soldiers and police officers short of reaching its October goal of 305,000. However, attrition may be undoing much of this remarkable growth. In June, Lieutenant General William Caldwell, who heads the NATO Training Mission, said the ANA's attrition rate is around 2.3 percent on an annualized basis. Asked to clarify whether 2.3 percent a month meant 30 percent a year, Caldwell [replied](#), "That's correct."

That hollow force, according to a range of estimates, is expected to cost anywhere between [\\$4 billion](#) and [\\$9 billion a year](#) — that for an Afghan government whose domestic revenue is roughly [\\$2 billion](#) annually. Explains [Ending the U.S. War in Afghanistan: A Primer](#) co-author David Wildman, this financing issue will have massive downside [implications](#):

Afghanistan will be forced to be a foreign-dependent militia state for years to come. Large centralized army and police forces drain away resources from critical infrastructure and civilian development needs. Years ago, the 1994 U.N. Human Development Report on "Human Security" documented that the higher the ratio of military to non-military government spending was in a country, the more unstable and the more vulnerable its people were to lack of health and education.

Ironically for Afghanistan, creating a centralized state and a modern, professional military will perpetuate the dependency on foreign patronage that has plagued that country [for centuries](#). Therefore it seems fitting that military and civilian planners in Washington have made clear they never intend to abandon Afghanistan.

The new U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Marine General John Allen, [said recently](#), "The plan in Afghanistan is to be successful." He added, "[W]hile some folks might hear that we're departing in 2014 ... we're actually going to be here for a long time." Asked about the number of American troops that will remain, Allen said that as part of an [agreement with the Afghans](#), "We're talking about forces that will provide an advisory capacity."

That commitment echoes pledges that the White House has made. Earlier this year, Vice President Joe Biden [said](#), "It's Afghans who must secure their country. And it's Afghans who must build their nation. ... And we will continue to stand ready to help you in that effort after 2014."

That dedication bumps up against the wishes of an American public [increasingly skeptical](#) that a viable and independent Afghan state can be built at a reasonable price. The cynicism is understandable. From "[the war we must win](#)" to "[clear, hold, and build](#)," officials have been promising Americans for years that victory is right around the corner, even as their own reporting indicates that 10 years on, we appear to be going in circles.

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