

THE NATIONAL INTEREST

NATO Summit Will Reaffirm Afghanistan's Weakness

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The focus of the upcoming NATO summit in Chicago will be Afghanistan. President Obama is expected to speak of the need for solidarity from the international community. His only major success will be a pledge from NATO members to commit funds to Afghanistan well beyond 2014. Difficult questions surrounding the mission's long-term sustainability will remain unanswered. But any long-term plan for stabilization must put Afghans in the lead. That is the country's true path to self-sufficiency.

The estimated cost of paying for the 230,000-350,000-strong Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) hovers between \$4-6 billion, annually. The President will seek \$1.3 billion from allies, which in an age of austerity will be difficult for NATO partners, leaving the United States to foot much of the bill. Although it is cheaper to fund Afghan forces than deploy foreign troops, long-term operations, maintenance, and sustainment costs for the ANSF may continue through 2025. Building security and governance to the point where locals can stand on their own is an indefinite commitment, not an exit strategy.

The real story of the summit is that United States and NATO officials plan to extend their financial support to Afghanistan in the face of war-weary publics at home, brazen insurgent attacks in the capital, and a string of scandals

involving coalition forces and their Afghan counterparts. Lingering issues that will go unresolved include the quality of the ANSF, the seemingly indefatigable insurgency, and the long-talked about negotiated peace settlement with extremists and regional powers.

Beyond the cost and size of the security forces, President Obama will also speak of the lofty commitments in the recently signed U.S.-Afghanistan strategic partnership framework, which include “protecting and promoting shared democratic values” and “social and economic development.” What remains unanswered is what will happen if Afghanistan does *not* meet these ambitious benchmarks?

What will happen if the fundamental rights and freedoms of women are not protected? What will happen if the 2014 presidential elections are not free and fair? What will happen if security and national unity are not advanced? Does failure void the agreement, and for how long will Afghanistan rely on the United States if we do not see progress? These questions persist as American taxpayers spend \$2 billion a week on an unpopular war, and as widespread local corruption and perceptions of social injustice continue to fuel passive support to the insurgency.

The international community’s pledge to never abandon Afghanistan is well-intentioned, especially since Washington was partly responsible for that country’s past and present turmoil. But it is also imperative that the international community not become Afghanistan’s perpetual crutch. Afghans desperately seek foreign assistance, but what really matters is the long-term sustainability of Afghanistan’s institutions. Sadly, social and political changes won’t be seen as legitimate if they depend on institutions that appear to be at odds with local traditions or are excessively reliant on foreign patronage.

Paradoxically, the U.S. and NATO may wind up both helping and hindering Afghanistan on its path toward self-sufficiency.