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**A peace deal**

While the international community’s attention is focused on the landmark intra-Afghan peace talks currently taking place in the Qatari capital Doha, a new report detailing the staggering amounts of money lost to ‘corruption, abuse and waste’ in Afghanistan in the last two decades highlighted the many challenges the country will continue to face even after the signing of a long-awaited peace deal between the Taliban and the Afghan government.

Since the toppling of the Taliban regime in late 2001, the US Congress has appropriated nearly $134bn for Afghan reconstruction programmes. This is almost equivalent to the amount the United States spent on rebuilding Western Europe in the aftermath of World War II, which cost approximately $135bn in today’s money and constituted about 4.3 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the US.

The office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) – the US government’s independent oversight authority on Afghan reconstruction – recently released a report containing a forensic audit of $63bn of the money the US has spent on Afghanistan’s reconstruction since 2002. The report, published on October 20, concluded that “a total of approximately $19 billion, or 30% of the amount reviewed, was lost to waste, fraud, and abuse.” In 2018-2019 alone, the report said, approximately $1.8bn was lost to corruption.

The SIGAR report clearly demonstrates that endemic corruption, widespread insecurity, and lack of accountability continue to make investing in Afghanistan highly risky. This exposes the failure of the Afghan government’s efforts to prevent the proliferation of corruption and casts serious doubts over its ability to successfully oversee the reconstruction of the war-torn country after reaching a settlement with the Taliban.

Afghanistan has come a long way in the last two decades. Millions of girls are now in school, infrastructure has been built across the country, and through a nation-wide community development scheme, local communities now have the ability to control their affairs at the village level. Yet considering the huge sums spent on nation-building initiatives and the persistence of problems like widespread poverty, insecurity, and institutional fragility, it is clear the right formula for ensuring the sustainable reconstruction of Afghanistan is yet to emerge. In fact, almost no progress has been made on this front since I led a major study on the reconstruction of Afghanistan on behalf of the UK government more than a decade ago, in 2008.

It is important for those negotiating in Doha to understand that, whatever the outcome of their talks may be, Afghanistan will remain highly dependent on foreign aid for the foreseeable future. By some conservative estimates, it needs $5bn in foreign aid annually merely to prevent the collapse of its core institutions. As donor fatigue sets in after 20 years of inefficient reconstruction spending, combined with the added pressures on foreign aid budgets exerted by populist nationalism and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for a clear plan to address systemic problems that undermine reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan. It is vital that those seeking to gain authority in a post-settlement Afghanistan see that the country’s myriad problems cannot be resolved simply by agreeing on an end to violence.

Whatever the shape or form the settlement reached between the Taliban and the Afghan government takes, those in the driving seat of the country will assume a huge financial responsibility. To ensure investments made in post-settlement Afghanistan are not lost to waste, corruption and abuse like before, they will need to renew citizens’ as well as donors’ trust in state institutions.

The enormity of the challenge ahead and the need for a strong central state for a successful political transition was recently acknowledged by Afghanistan’s President Ashraf Ghani in his lecture at the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies. While Afghanistan’s institutional architecture is definitely not perfect and it may prove impossible for the Afghan government to distance themselves totally from the findings in the SIGAR report, with talks ongoing, there is an opportunity for a new start – an opportunity for the government to lay out a new vision for the country that can assure donors and the international community at large that things are going to be different in the post-settlement era.

It would also be prudent for the Taliban to dedicate some thought into how they would address this issue should the agreement incorporate them into state institutions. There is now a clear opportunity, and expectation, for the Taliban to take some firm positions and communicate to the Afghan people how they can be a partner in addressing poverty, the marginalisation of women, and fostering responsive and accountable institutions in the post-settlement era.

If Afghans wait until a political settlement is reached in Doha to discuss these issues, then it will be too late. Both sides need to engage all sectors of the Afghan society in a wide-ranging dialogue on these core issues and deliberate over alternative routes towards sustainable, long-term reconstruction.

As such, the forthcoming donor pledging conference for Afghanistan’s future, which will be co-hosted by Finland, Afghanistan, and the United Nations in Geneva on November 23 and 24, must be used as an opportunity to focus the involved parties’ minds on these developmental challenges and what role they can play in advancing realistic and sustainable peace plans.

A key aspect of this should be encouraging the Afghan government to come up with and present to donors local development plans, including for areas that are currently ruled by the Taliban and that have long been neglected. This may push policymakers to engage with local communities in those areas, identify their needs. This could also help all involved parties to incorporate the positions of the Taliban into the agenda of the conference, even if the group would not have a seat at the table.

Excerpted: ‘A peace deal alone cannot solve Afghanistan’s myriad problems’

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