What should we expect from the Afghanistan Conference in Bonn?

https://www.e-ir.info/2011/12/02/what-should-we-expect-from-the-afghanistan-conference-in-bonn/

STEFAN WOLFF, DEC 2 2011

On 5 December, it will have been ten years since the conclusion of the Bonn Agreement on Afghanistan, and yet another international conference will be held in the former German capital to consider the future of the country.

The 2001 Agreement effectively marked the end of the brief US-led campaign against the Taliban regime in response to the attacks of 9/11. It set out the governance arrangements for Afghanistan in a transitional period, the timeline for the transition, and requested the United Nations to assist Afghans with ensuring security and building a viable post-Taliban state. The Agreement was endorsed by UN Security Council Resolution 1383(2001) of 6 December 2001. Two weeks later, UN Security Council Resolution 1386(2001) established, for an initial period of six months, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that is still operational today. In March 2002, under the terms of UN Security Council Resolution 1401(2002), the UN set up a permanent United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) that took over from an earlier United Nations Special Mission in Afghanistan. Its mandate, renewed in March this year for another 12 months, has always been to assist the Afghan government to establish the foundations for stable peace and sustainable economic development in the country. Yet, ten years on from the Bonn Agreement, the joined (and often not so joined) efforts of the UN, NATO (who took over command of ISAF in 2003) and the Afghan government have made at best moderate progress towards this goal.

Afghanistan clearly did, and still does, represent a major challenge for internationalised peacebuilding and statebuilding efforts. The fundamental problem remains wide-spread insecurity. The most recent Report of the Secretary-General on Afghanistan notes that by “the end of August, the average monthly number of incidents for 2011 was 2,108, up 39 per cent compared with the same period in 2010.” Of these armed clashes with insurgents and the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) accounted for the vast majority of incidents, two-thirds of which occurred in the south and south-east of Afghanistan around Kandahar.

This is a depressing statistic, not least in the light of a schedule that will see ISAF forces being withdrawn over the next three years. This withdrawal suits both the main troop contributing nations (especially the US and UK) and the Afghan government who left no doubt that it wanted ISAF’s presence to end sooner rather than later. This is, of course, the same Afghan government which does not have adequate security forces of its own (despite the recent commencement of the second phase of transition of control from ISAF to Afghan security forces in areas covering about half of the Afghan population) and whose president made the equally shocking and astonishing statement (shortly after a visit to Afghanistan by IS Secretary of State Hilary Clinton in October this year) that his country would side with Pakistan in case of a US-Pakistan military confrontation.

That peace remains elusive is also evident from the fact that many normally civilian statebuilding tasks are still part and parcel of ISAF’s counter-insurgency guidance. While it is commendable that ISAF troops are asked to confront the culture of impunity, to help Afghans build accountable governance, to identify corrupt officials, and to promote local reintegration—they should not have to do so ten years after the Taliban regime has been ousted.

But it would be too easy to blame ISAF or the fledgling Afghan security forces alone. The Taliban insurgency continues because it does not lack in motivated fighters, has sufficient means to pursue its campaign, and has

opportunities to do so. Motivation, for the most part, is a mix of Islamic fundamentalism; nationalist resistance against a perceived foreign occupation; and resentment of a corrupt, only moderately effective, Pashtun-dominated central government. Means are sufficiently available in the form of cheap and plentiful small arms and of the 'ingredients' to mass-produce IEDs, as well as funds from transnational organised crime, especially the drugs trade. Opportunities that the insurgency continues to have stem from the longstanding expertise in fighting an insurgency in a country that has been engulfed in civil war for decades and from porous borders, difficult terrain, and largely ungoverned areas in neighbouring Pakistan that provide safe havens and training grounds for insurgents. The insurgency thus is far from unified, and it may well be possible to negotiate with at least some elements in it, even though the track record of doing so is less than promising.

So, after the London Afghanistan Conference of 2006, the Paris Afghanistan Conference of 2008, another London Afghanistan Conference in January 2010 and the Kabul Afghanistan Conference in July 2010 what should we expect of the forthcoming Bonn Conference? Three necessary messages need to form the core of the outcome of next week's conference:

1. Continued international support for peacebuilding and statebuilding in Afghanistan, including after ISAF's withdrawal is complete in 2014. Without such a clear and meaningful commitment, it is unlikely that any further progress will be made in Afghanistan, and some of what has been achieved is likely to be lost.

2. Such continued international support needs to be made conditional, however, on efforts by the Afghan government to enhance the professional standards of its security forces, accelerate a stalled peace process that offers a realistic perspective for an inclusive political system, curb corruption, and improve the provision of services and economic opportunities to its people These are all high-priority tasks, but the Afghan government and people and their international partners have shared interests in moving forward on these fronts and achieve a greater measure of stabilisation and democratisation before 2014.

3. Emphasise that the international community is committed to regional stability beyond Afghanistan. The country is at the centre of a geopolitically highly significant yet volatile region that includes Pakistan, Iran, and the post-Soviet states of Central Asia. Regional stability is a particular challenge, and more than an expressed international commitment, what is needed is follow-through. The deterioration in NATO/US-Pakistan relations following the recent border incident, and the subsequent boycott of the Bonn Conference by Pakistan will clearly make this more difficult, as will the even more serious deterioration of relations between Iran and the West, exemplified in the ransacking of the British Embassy in Tehran, and the subsequent expulsion of Iranian diplomats from London.

In essence, the 2011 Bonn Conference needs to make clear that the Afghan government and people, and their partners in the international community, are united in their efforts to make tangible and sustainable progress towards a more stable Afghanistan in an equally more stable region. This will not be an easy task to accomplish and it will not be without setbacks. Despite all the failures and disappointed aspirations of the past ten years, however, the alternatives to continued partnership on the road to 2014 and beyond are even less palatable. Afghans do not deserve a return to Taliban rule or all-out civil war, and the international community cannot afford the country sliding back and dragging the region with it.

Stefan Wolff *(@stefwolff) is Professor of International Security at the University of Birmingham. He is a specialist in the management of contemporary security challenges and has extensively written on ethnic conflict, international conflict management and state-building.*

About the author:

Stefan Wolff is Professor of International Security at the University of Birmingham, England, UK. He specialises in the management of contemporary international security challenges, especially in the prevention, management and

settlement of ethnic conflicts and in post-conflict stabilisation and state-building in deeply divided and war-torn societies.