Two hundred years ago, the British troops which encountered Afghans for the first time were led by the splendidly named Montstuart Elphinstone. The 29-year old Scottish diplomat, fluent in Persian and Hindi, had been dispatched from Delhi with several hundred Indian troops, 600 camels and a handful of white officers to encourage the “King of Caubul” [sic] into an alliance against Napoleon. Impressed with their physical prowess, he noted of the Afghans: “Their vices are revenge, envy, avarice, rapacity and obstinacy; on the other hand, they are fond of liberty, faithful to their friends, kind to their dependents, hospitable, brave, hardy, frugal, laborious and prudent.” He said while they spent much of their time fighting each other, they swiftly combined to repel any outsider and were ever “ready to defend their rugged country against a tyrant.” Their martial disposition has led some to question whether, to invert Clausewitz, politics in Afghanistan is not war by other means.

In June 2011, it was announced that the US government was conducting “outreach” talks with the Taliban in Afghanistan. This highlighted the need to find a political solution as foreign combat troops prepared to pull out by 2014, a year and a half after President Barack Obama announced a troop surge to pressure the Taliban and create time and space for the development of Afghan security forces. In this light, this paper argues that the principal constraint to peace in Afghanistan is not a “cultural” phenomenon – that is, the so-called “Afghan way.” Rather, Afghans have reacted in an entirely logical and rational way to a set of incentives and circumstances. Stability demands
changing these conditions, while moving Afghanistan off its addiction to foreign public funding and narcotics money.

* The West’s strategy towards Afghanistan has evolved significantly over the past decade. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks on New York and Washington, the United States opted for the troop-light approach championed by then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld to remove the Taliban, which had provided a safe haven for the terrorists responsible for 9/11. This initially successful strategy employed a combination of Special Forces and precision bombing in support of the Northern Alliance, and culminated in a peace deal brokered at Bonn in December 2001. The next four years witnessed a gradual strengthening of the civilian and military components of the international presence in Afghanistan, although the strategic focus of the United States and the United Kingdom shifted to Iraq. During this time the remnants of the Taliban slowly regrouped and began preparations to launch the large-scale insurgency which erupted in 2006. Since then the number of international forces in Afghanistan has increased year-on-year as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has attempted to expand the writ of the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (GIRoA) countrywide and tame the Pashtu-dominated south, the Taliban’s heartland. The US troop “surge” in 2010 has heralded a further evolution in the West’s strategy, one which it is hoped will finally bring the peace and stability all Afghans so desperately yearn for and deserve.

Today the NATO-led ISAF comprises 47 nations, operating in “partnership” with the Afghan government to counter the Taliban insurgency and bolster the Afghan National Army (ANA), National Police (ANP) and Border Police (ABP).

The ANA, widely respected for its incorruptibility, is set to grow to 171,600 by the end of October 2011; and the Afghan National Police is scheduled to expand to 134,000 during the same period.¹ The ANA and ANP now form two sides of a “Wall of Three” with ISAF on operations; previously the emphasis was on giving an Afghan “face” to ISAF, an altogether more patronizing approach. One example of the enhanced effort to make the ANP central to Afghan security, rather than a substantial part of the problem, as it has been in the past, involves an eight-week retraining scheme, held at two centers in Helmand. The aim is to “recruit locally, train centrally, post locally.” Yet serious problems remain. In some locations, as many as 50 percent of police do not turn up for work, their salaries being divvied up among others, while one-third of police had not, by mid-2011, received formal training.

¹ Many of the statistics were gathered at source during trips to Afghanistan during 2010. On this specific number, see http://www.ntm-a.com.
Bolstered by increased US troop numbers, ISAF forces totaled more than 140,000 by the start of 2011, focusing their activities on the restive southern provinces of Kandahar and Helmand. Critical enabling assets such as helicopters have increased tenfold in the South in four years. Kandahar became the busiest single runway worldwide in 2010 with more than 25,000 flight movements per month. By the end of 2010, camps Bastion and Leatherneck in Helmand housed a peak of 22,500 troops, the British contingent totaling no less than eight percent of the UK’s whole army. Critical aircraft enablers along with improved mine-proof vehicles, better training and understanding of local conditions and actors, and improved targeting, intelligence, reconnaissance and communications have greatly improved ISAF’s combat power.

There is also much greater focus to ISAF’s actions. As the fight has moved to the Taliban’s home-ground of Kandahar and Helmand, some areas, especially in the North and West, have unavoidably slipped down the priority order. More troops and greater focus have enabled ISAF to shift its troop-to-population densities closer to the optimal 20-25 counter-insurgency troops per 1,000 of population.

There is additionally a much richer appreciation of the local tribal, familial and personality dynamics at play in the country, as well as the complex underlying motives for the insurgency, notably the difference between urban and rural communities, where violence is often used to protect a way of life and define manhood. This helps to explain why, for example, Kandahar City, where most of the province’s population resides, accounted only for seven percent of insurgent acts in 2010.

Lastly, there is now widespread recognition of the importance of governance and development as facilitators of long-term change. Unless the military component can link to other lines of operation including governance and the economy, politics and regional/international diplomacy, the insurgency will simply persist and we will be unable to tackle the perceived and real grievances that feed it.

All of this is illustrative of the refinement in ISAF’s counter-insurgency strategy, now summed up as: Shape (public opinion, aligning military activity with political objectives, and targeting Taliban leadership through mainly special forces’ activity), Clear (the insurgent through military means primarily), Hold (the security situation) while one Builds (the economy and enables political reconciliation). Partnership with GIRoA is seen as crucial throughout these stages. Even so, it has been the last bit – the “Build” – that no one has got particularly right yet in a post-conflict environment, whether in Afghanistan, Africa or anywhere else.

**Five Binds: The Challenge of Stability Operations in Afghanistan**

A great deal of blood and treasure has been expended in the search for peace and stability in Afghanistan. $400 billion so far spent, nearly 2000
coalition lives lost (some 1593 US and 373 UK soldiers alone by June 2011), and about the same number of Afghan soldiers and policemen again annually now, including over 799 Afghan National Security Forces in the whole of 2010.² Yet peace will remain elusive unless the international community can find the means to deal with five binds – which have proven difficult to escape in this long-beleaguered land.

The first is the overall strategic, political dilemma. Should ISAF focus its activities solely on countering terrorism? In colloquial terms, this would mean setting clear red-lines for Kabul: leaving the locals to run things as they want, but if they do something bad, they get hit and hit hard.

Alternatively, as Mao would have it, by deepening its engagement should the international Afghanistan mission not attempt to transform the swamp in which the Taliban swim in seeking to bring about major political and socio-economic change in the country? Inevitably this must involve some incorporation of the Taliban and its (largely Pasthu) supporters into the political fold. Although there is a danger of extrapolating too much from the Iraq experience, the manner in which the Sunni minority was adeptly brought on board by the US military through assiduous tribal co-option, harnessing their own antipathy against foreign fighters, is highly instructive. But unlike Sunni in Iraq, the Pasthu and the Taliban represent the majority of Afghans, at least in the south. They have to be converted en masse.

As Nick Clegg, deputy UK prime minister, has succinctly observed, “The great dilemma now is, how can we convert [the troop surge] into a political settlement.”³ Progress here to an extent hinges on how we manage the second bind, the partnership between ISAF and the GoIRA and in particular the difficult trade-offs between short-term stability and the longer-term governance imperative.

The repeated failure to find a productive and sustained formula to work with local political actors has been at the heart of ISAF’s difficulties. “[President] Karzai has seen 13 ISAF commanders, five UN special representatives, five US ambassadors and three EU special reps come and go,” observes one foreigner who has lived in Afghanistan since 2002. “He has seen it all it before. He can sit around and dictate things on his timescale.”⁴ The President frequently takes the West to task for his country’s woes, although he himself has come in for stern criticism, at home and abroad, over his family’s finances, and his record on the real stuff of development – jobs, health, education and agriculture.

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² At the Brooking Institute Afghanistan Index at http://www.brooking.edu, corroborated by national sources.
⁴ Discussion, ISAF HQ, Kabul, September 2010.
One of the most significant yet underreported developments in Afghanistan during the first half of the past decade was the relatively seamless transformation of the country’s warlords into businessmen, many well connected in the political echelons. Curbing the excesses of these power-brokers is essential. At the same time, however, the stability they and their private militia offer can be harnessed for the good of Afghanistan. Establishing a new governance regime in Afghanistan may require us doing both.

Take just one example: to the south of Kandahar Province, the border town of Spin Boldak, the gateway to and from northern Pakistan, has been controlled by its own generalissimo, Abdul Razziq, a man appointed in May 2011 as the police chief for Kandahar province. The 30-something de facto commander of the 3,500-strong Border Police in the “Third Zone” is said to earn an estimated $5-6 million per month from his various border businesses. But he also contributes to stability, not only in the border region, but in Kandahar City itself, as his positive military contribution to the Kandahar Malajat operation in August 2010 illustrates.

Whether we like it or not, power-brokers like Abdul Razziq have a positive role to play in developing Afghanistan – but only if the government can stop them distorting the country’s economy so perniciously. To date, the government has been focused on ensuring security and distributing profits through concentrating on foreign relations (for continued aid) and local patronage and politics (to maintain control). Consequently, the economic system is characterized by widening inequality, fueling grievances alongside greed. Afghanistan has the third most unequal society world-wide after Angola and Equatorial Guinea. Improvement to the lives of the average Afghan has been limited, even though the success of any foreign and reform effort must ultimately be measured by the extent of such benefit.

Thus far it has proven impossible to break out of the mold of Afghanistan’s three economies: the largest one, the aid economy; a second “illicit economy” centering around drugs, worth around $150 million inside the country, but also including smuggling, which remains lucrative given relatively high tariffs in neighboring Pakistan; and a third tiny licit economy, both formal and informal. In the latter, with two million farmers, the bulk is dependent on the rural economy, even though growth has been severely constrained by conflict and poor infrastructure. There is very little industry (a traditional route for export-led development in low-wage countries), virtually no mining (despite considerable potential), and an embryonic services sector. The relatively glitzy world of efficiency in the aid capital of Kabul contrasts starkly with the grinding poverty of those in the rural areas.

The next bind is regional: realizing that peace in Afghanistan depends on stability in neighboring Pakistan, and that country’s relationship with India. And yet that country’s own challenges require a state-building project of their own. The relationship with Afghanistan is complicated by the latter’s refusal to recognize the border that separates them and bisects the Pashtu; yet three
million Afghans and 20 million Afghan relatives live inside Pakistan. A regional solution also requires finding a formula, in Pakistan as in Afghanistan, for two societies – one a centralized, Western-styled democracy, the other localized and tribally-based – to co-exist, all the while ensuring sufficient economic growth to not only meet basic needs but assuage expectations. The Afghan campaign is not only, or even primarily, about stabilizing that war-torn Central Asian state, no matter how noble that task. Afghanistan is all about Pakistan. As the vogue shorthand suggests, “AfPak” have become inseparable, but not in the way that most presume. In warning against short-term thinking, Robert Gates, the outgoing Secretary of Defense, noted in June 2011 of the need to think carefully about the “costs of failure.” The relative cost of stability, including the expense of maintaining a large Afghan army and police force, may prove a small investment in long-term stability, and pale against the cost in terms both of blood and treasure of maintaining a foreign force in Afghanistan.

Thus, the fourth bind concerns the effectiveness of aid. By 2010 the international community was spending more than $100 billion on in-kind military and other assistance annually in Afghanistan. This includes more than $10 billion in development aid annually, amounting to $333 per Afghan man, woman and child per year. In some areas, such as the southern provinces, this concentration has been much higher. Yet given the lack of development impact – as measured by the existence of an economy outside that supported by donor money – it may have been better (and considerably more efficient) if the international community had simply bombed the country with bundles of money.

Of course not every Afghan receives this aid. Much of it goes into just a few hands. And much is spent on consumptive rather than productive areas of investment aimed at expanding business and creating jobs. As one senior Afghan policeman has noted in this regard, “The return of the international community [on its aid to Afghanistan] has been very poor. I would be very angry if I was them. I would look closely at my partners.”

The scale of the failure and wastage is staggering, even among hardened aid-types. “Aid expenditure in Afghanistan is highly distributive,” said one USAID official in Kabul. “There is too much money. It is so gross in its volume that the effort is mostly to disperse it rather than disperse it in a wise, sustainable way.” And where jobs are created by donors, this is normally in services, most notably construction. This makes sustainability problematic when the geyser of donor funding is inevitably capped.

Just as the “problem” of Afghanistan is little different – though on a bigger, more lucrative scale – than stabilization situations elsewhere, the

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6 Discussion, FOIB Walton, September 2010.
7 Discussion, ISAF HQ, Kabul, September 2010.
challenge thus facing the international community is much the same as those it has attempted to remedy elsewhere. Where there has been success – Liberia is a good example – there is a willing if not always efficient local partner. Where a local partner is not effective, but has been elected, then little can be done to improve matters apart from providing an external security guarantee, constant urging, embedding external support in government and maintaining hope. Sierra Leone is a case in point, where the UK government has lavished diplomatic attention and military and development support for a decade, but with baby steps of local progress in governance and development.

Aid has also, even in conditions of relative peace, proven to be an ineffective means of delivering development. At best, as in the cases of Vietnam and Singapore, aid has been used to provide infrastructure, freeing up other government money for investment in productive sectors. The ratio of foreign aid-to-local expenditure remains pathetic: in Africa this has been lower than ten percent at times, and averages around 50 percent. In Somaliland, to take another extreme example, it is less than 20 percent according to government ministers there.8 Private sector investment and capacity has so far consistently proven the most efficient and sustainable route to development, including in the donor nations themselves.

There is a more insidious problem in this. Donor and other forms of external support not only disincentivize normal entrepreneurial activity (since there is an aid-mothership happily distributing largesse sufficient for the elite) and distorts key economic factors such as overvaluing the currency through large donor inflows, but offers local politicians convenient means to externalize their choices, problems and failures.

The final bind is that of time. The window for foreigners to make a difference to peace-building missions is around a decade, after which their domestic supporters grow wearisome as other priorities take over, and critically locals see their actions less as welcome assistance than undue foreign interference.

Five Proposals: Addressing Afghanistan’s Stability Binds

Mohammed, an ebullient Kabul trader and marketing expert, inadvertently captured the country’s problems well: “In the United States,” he said, “you make $100 and keep $20 for yourself. In Afghanistan, you make $100 but keep $90 for yourself. This is the better place to do business.”9 But the problem is that the $100 in Afghanistan comes from the tax paid by the American and European. It is hardly sustainable.

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8 Discussion, Minister of Planning, Hargeisa, June 2011.
9 Discussion, Kabul, September 2010.
What, however, can Afghanistan make and sell that will create additional jobs and ensure a greater stake in stability by Afghans, blunting the insurgency and recruits to that cause? The international community has found it very difficult at expediting development, especially in post-conflict countries. This should not be surprising since the donors themselves developed through internal rather than external actions. All development, to paraphrase the cliché about politics, is local.

Thus the first need is for the international community to express a generational commitment to confronting the scourge of terrorism by dealing with the lawless spaces where it flourishes in combination with radicalism and grinding poverty. As the lead character (played by Tom Hanks) in Charlie Wilson’s War noted, “This is what we always do. We always go in with our ideals and we change the world and then we leave. We always leave. But that ball, though, it keeps on bouncing. . . .” Here the means have to be found to make aid more than just a feeding trough for local warlords, but geared to state reconstruction.

Combined with a tendency to examine rather than “to do”, foreign-led attempts to create jobs in Afghanistan follow a pattern: an idea followed by a scoping study, normally backed up by a consultative process, an evaluation process producing a commission to conduct field-work to deliver a detailed report “workshopped” along the way by various representative constituents and appraised by peer reviewers in “deep-dive longitudinal” processes. And the product has to be matched by a business plan which, normally after a period involving at least one turnover of donor staff, is condemned to a dusty plight on a shelf, forgotten when the idea is revived later and the process started over again.

The traditional route of an entrepreneur with a good idea borrowing money and starting a business is lost in this unproductive whirl. Good ideas should become business cases, not international NGO causes. Turning pomegranates into juice in Afghanistan is a case in point. The juice is much in demand world-wide given its anti-oxidant and other healthy properties.

Adding value to Afghan agriculture is one of the few job-creation routes open, especially in the conflict-strewn south. Kandahar, for example, produces over 70 percent of the country’s 80,000 ton pomegranate production, and the Argandab region to the north of Kandahar City produces 80 percent of that figure. The return for pomegranate farmers is over $6,000 per hectare, compared to $2,000 for poppy. If especially the lower grade pomegranates could be turned into juice for the burgeoning international market, even more value could be added.

But an $11 million brand-new juice factory in Kabul has so far made little difference. Housed in a Soviet-built former garment factory on the Jalalabad Road, the facility operates at around five percent of its potential 40,000 ton annual capacity mainly due to a lack of operating capital. Yet it is widely acknowledged that even if this facility was operating flat-out that there
is scope for at least three other similar facilities countrywide. Indeed, many
question the wisdom of placing the plant in Kabul given that it is a distance
from the bulk of production in the south.

Establishing what is described in contemporary consultant-speak as a
pomegranate “value chain” offers one of the few opportunities to turn an idea
into jobs in Afghanistan, showing that there is another path to prosperity other
than violence. Turning this idea into reality does not, however, require an
international NGO, another study or workshop. It requires action.

Second, there is a need, too, to find the means towards a workable
political compact beyond episodic international conferences and short fact-
finding visits. Counter-insurgency 101 teaches us that the solutions to violence
are political in which military, development and diplomatic means are used to
support the outcome.

Not only does ISAF have a role to play in setting the conditions for
enabling reconciliation between the Taliban and other Afghans, but it needs to
help Kabul focus on the affairs of the provinces. The executive style of
governance has led the capital to prefer to deal with the provinces by proxy
power-brokers. Just one minister has visited the southern Zabul Province, in
the year prior to April 2010, and then for just two hours. The governor of
Kandahar Tooraylai Wesa has regularly complained that “I have never heard a
minister cancel his trip to Europe. But they do so regularly to Kandahar. And
then if they come, they only do so to [the ISAF base at] Kandahar Airfield for a
few hours.”10 The “representation deficit” is exacerbated by the current system
of rotations for governors and the appointments (rather than election) of
district level representatives.

For all of the international community’s attempts to instill a system of
governance, the one system still intact and which has endured Afghanistan’s
political ebbs and flows is the tribal elders. We need to ensure it remains a
force for stability, perhaps by redirecting the efforts of the Special Forces
towards a more traditional function of support and influence of the local
population.

Governance cannot just be bottom up. A further form of democratic
“extension” could happen by including parliamentarians (and not just min-
isters) on fact-finding trips to military installations, which would not only
improve the information flow, but dilute, at the same time, the centralization of
power in the hands of the executive.

Working with Kabul means one must choose when to get tough with
local partners, preferably in private. It demands getting more out of aid
programs, setting scorecards for evaluating their positive impact beyond just
“doing no harm”, but including the impact on job creation, better policy, more
efficient government and infrastructure, and more responsive government.
It means simplifying governance procedures, mindful of local capacity

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10 Discussion, Kandahar City, KPRT, April 2010.
constraints, such as was attempted by the establishment of President Karzai’s Policy Action Group in 2006. It also requires identifying where local capacity exists and working with and through these actors, recognizing, fundamentally, that the solution to Afghanistan’s problems has to be local rather than external. This also demands prioritizing resources to building the capacity to govern. That there is no Afghan School of Public Administration eight years on speaks volumes about missed opportunities.

But allowing the locals to run things their way does not mean turning a blind eye to corruption and the activities of the power-brokers. Part of the solution concerns the need to insert ethics into the political discourse. Holding Kabul’s feet to the fire of good governance requires continually stressing the need for reputation, honor and image among Afghans, that is simply unacceptable to gain such wealth in the face of the existence of such poverty and inequality.

The third need is similarly predominantly internal – for Afghans themselves to make economic reform a priority. An economic, and particularly an investment, road-map is required, along with related policy reforms. GIRoA should make this is a priority, and for ISAF members this is also a main concern in their discussion with Kabul.

Fundamentally, the economy needs to increase absorptive capacity – jobs – of its citizens, without which the sense of individual alienation, helplessness and grievance will perpetuate, and the power-brokers will remain disproportionately influential. The economy also stands to benefit by achieving some clarity about land registration as a precursor to its tradability and use as collateral for business. Signaling the pending digitization of all land records held by Kabul would be a sensible and practical start.

Until Afghanistan can produce enough to feed itself, it will remain little more than an aid vassal. Agricultural development is thus critical, although currently the expense of the Afghani relative, especially, to the Pakistani rupee makes it easier to import than to produce locally. This is one cost of large-scale aid inflows. Yet food self-sufficiency will not only provide enough food for urban concentrations, but reduces prices by at least twice the cost of transport on the global price.

To encourage investment the government will have to do much more to address perceptions of risk, showing that they are intent on dealing with corruption and questions about the rule of law, not least through the prosecution of high-profile figures. Apologies for a poor operating environment will be insufficient to grow the economy. Considerations about growth should dwarf all other economic policy concerns. But again, actions not ideas are required.

The fourth solution focuses on the regional dimension. At one level this requires carefully thought out and assiduously practiced diplomacy. Not only does this necessitate working hand-in-glove with the Pakistan government in keeping it onside and assisting it on its own fraught development and
governance path. It also requires addressing regional insecurities by enabling rapprochement between India and Pakistan. No small order, but crucial, and linked to the duration of international commitment to Afghanistan. It would not be unreasonable to presume that Islamabad fears Western withdrawal as a precursor to increased Iranian and Indian influence inside Afghanistan. As Bob Woodward has noted, Pakistan has “worried more about being encircled by India than being undermined by extremists inside its borders.” Little wonder that security pragmatists inside Pakistan would then hedge their security bets between international co-operation and support for the Taliban.

In more practical terms, however, such regional diplomacy can prove the catalyst for wider change and security reassurance. A lot has been achieved in improving Pakistan-Afghan trade, increasing from $40 million to $1 billion in a decade. But much more can be done. This is partly dependent on improved policy, and partly on reduced prejudice. There needs to be continuing focus on reducing (or preferably eliminating) the incentives for smuggling, notably the tariff differential between Pakistan and Afghanistan. At the same time there needs to be much greater focus on creating the opportunities for trade through, for example, the curtailing of transloading requirements, and the instituting of regularized exchanges between chambers of commerce and between journalists. Other Afghan constraints to be managed include the high transportation costs (both as a result of transport policy and the security premium).

Finally, outside partners have to focus on both political and bureaucratic efforts to tackle corruption. Without changing this aspect of the Afghan operating system, the counter-insurgency effort is doomed. The culture of impunity gave rise to the Taliban in the 1990s and feeds the radical organization today.

Structural reforms are needed to reduce levels of corruption, including on procurement law and procedures, and prompt the GIRoA to set up a Revenue Service worthy of the name. This requires the professionalization of the civil service, making it responsive and capable of dealing with issues, and foremost loyal to the state and Afghan people, not politicians and tribes.

Changing the way in which contracts are given could be a key means of demonstrating a different way of doing business, while bringing about a modicum of power. It may not cut the power-brokers out altogether, not least since they control the only companies capable of carrying out many essential tasks. But it could change their behavior. One mechanism to achieve this is by establishing a contractual “scorecard” for ISAF contracts to ensure that not only are contractors seen to be complying with governance requirements, but that they are made to think about the need to spread their wealth around. Such a scorecard would include rankings on local ownership and procurement, female participation in management and ownership, record of tax payments, and employee equity.
Increasing the responsibility of the power-brokers by elevating them from informal to official positions is another way of checking their authority, bringing them more under public scrutiny. This is the most critical international action in the short-term without which the culture of impunity and poor governance will persist. There is, too, a need to increase the reputational concerns of the power-brokers, using their image and honor as key ISAF weapons.

**Conclusion: Confronting a False Dichotomy**

It is commonly presumed that there are two clear ways to square up to Afghanistan’s predicament. Both have their costs and consequences.

The first is to accelerate that pursued currently, if relatively unenthusiastically, by ISAF and the West – the attempt to build a functioning, accountable Afghan state and a relatively open, democratic society, free from the bad governance epitomized by the activities of the power-brokers. Such an aim requires a long-term commitment, in so doing tackling the scourge of institutionalized corruption, in effect shaking the Afghan state at its roots. This involves, as a start, unpicking the relationship between ISAF contracts and the “power-brokers,” most notably in lucrative logistics contracts. It means dealing with the endemic system of patronage. Plenty of Afghan and international political will is necessary for such changes to happen.

It demands investing large sums in electricity and other areas of infrastructure, to give Afghan citizens a demonstrable stake in change. It entails also investing in long-term development and not just trying to bring about short-term stability, realizing that countries get rich by making and selling things that people want to buy. In short, with this option, there can be no half measures, even though success cannot be guaranteed.

A second strategic option is to exit more quickly by turning Afghanistan, and especially the southern provinces of Kandahar, Zabul, Uruzgan, and Helmand, into a counter-terrorist campaign. But the notion of “Get in deeper or get out” is a false dichotomy. It is impossible to envisage getting out without the presence of a COIN framework – of political and economic efforts at state-building alongside the security dimension – for example. And nor is a long-term commitment likely without major qualifications in terms of residual commitment. It is possible to stay committed for the long-term and increasingly hand over authority to the Afghans themselves.

For one, it may be possible to use the stability that the power-brokers afford, while shaping them to play a more constructive part in Afghanistan’s future by giving them the responsibility that goes with their current authority. The assassination of the President’s half-brother Ahmed Wali Karzai by his bodyguard on 12 July 2001 in Kandahar, where he was the power-broker primus inter pares, illustrates their influence, the stake they hold and the risks for all parties. However, indications that the assassination might have
been the result of a personal rather than ideological feud over finances arising from coalition contracts stresses the danger both that the power-brokers and their network of dealings have for establishing governance and accountability in Afghanistan. Ending the so-called “culture of impunity” which these power-brokers represent requires much more focus on policy, accountability and creating alternatives in the Afghan economy, which needs to move from a begging bowl situation to one run along more productive lines. Only then will we truly see the back of this insurgency.