

QUAD-PLUS Dialogue



The Quad in Afghanistan—A Long-Term Commitment Required

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Almost 17 years after the deadly attacks on September 11, 2001, Afghanistan remains a serious security challenge for the Quad, which includes Australia, India, Japan, and the United States. Now that the Afghans have taken the lead with their own security, and President Trump has committed the U.S. to a new strategy, the mission in Afghanistan has entered into one of the most crucial periods.

Now is the time for the Quad to remain committed to the development of Afghanistan, the training mission of the Afghan security forces, and increased pressure on Pakistan to end its support to the Taliban. The history of the 1990s, with the rise of the Taliban, tells us what happens when the international community abandons Afghanistan. However, the Quad's commitment must be injected with a dose of realism on what is achievable, and what success might look like, in Afghanistan.

The Quad Has a Major Stake

The countries of the Quad have a major stake in the success of Afghanistan and have sacrificed greatly in blood and treasure. At the height of its troop deployment in 2011, the U.S. deployed over 100,000 troops to Afghanistan. At the time of this writing, 2,408 U.S. troops have been killed in the war in Afghanistan since 2001. There are currently 14,000 U.S. troops stationed in the country and the Department of Defense is considering sending another 1,000 in the spring.¹ The vast majority of these troops are taking part in NATO's train, advise, and assist mission

¹Olivia Beavers, "US Military Considering Additional 1,000 Troops for Afghanistan: Report" *The Hill*, January 21, 2018, <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/370017-us-military-considering-additional-1000-troops-for-afghanistan-report> (accessed February 20, 2018).

(Operation Resolute Support),² and a smaller number in a U.S.-led counterterrorism operation (Operation Freedom's Sentinel). The U.S. has provided to Afghanistan over \$121 billion in security and reconstruction assistance since 2001.³

Australia has played an integral role in the military mission in Afghanistan from the beginning, deploying over 30,000 troops to the country since 2001—42 of whom have made the ultimate sacrifice. Australia currently has 300 troops in Afghanistan as part of Operation Resolute Support. Canberra recently announced a commitment to spend more than \$100 million per year until 2020, training soldiers and police in Afghanistan as part of a two-year extension of its non-combat role.⁴ Australia's total aid contribution to Afghanistan since 2001 amounts to around US\$1.34 billion, which has been focused mainly on improving governance.⁵

Japan has been one of the top international aid providers to Afghanistan, second only to the U.S., committing nearly \$7 billion since 2001. Japan's generosity and aid have had a direct impact on the ground in Afghanistan. This is especially true in Ghor Province with Tokyo's generous financial support and civilian personnel contribution to the Chaghcharan Provincial Reconstruction Team.⁶ Japan also played a very important logistics function for the U.S. during a crucial period of the war. From late 2001 until 2008, naval ships from the Japan Self-Defense Forces were deployed in the Indian Ocean to refuel U.S. and other international naval vessels engaged in Operation Enduring Freedom.⁷

India is Afghanistan's fifth largest donor and has so far provided and committed approximately \$3 billion in assistance for the country. More than 4,000 kilometers of roads have been constructed in Afghanistan thanks to contributions from the Indian government. Other infrastructure projects of note include the Salma Dam (also known as the Afghan-India Friendship Dam) and electricity transmission lines in Herat Province, and the renovation of the Afghan Parliament building.⁸ In June 2017, a Kabul-Delhi air corridor was established to

²In addition, there are around 6,000 troops in Afghanistan from over 40 troop-contributing nations, mainly from NATO.

³Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 30, 2018, p. 61, <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2018-01-30qr.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2018).

⁴Peter Lloyd, "Australia Extends Afghanistan Operation, Announces \$100m per Year until 2020" *ABC News Online*, July 8, 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-07-08/australia-to-extend-military-presence-in-afghanistan/7582042> (accessed February 20, 2018).

⁵Australian Government, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Afghanistan Aid Fact Sheet*, October 2017, <http://dfat.gov.au/about-us/publications/Documents/aid-fact-sheet-afghanistan.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2018).

⁶News release, "Dispatch of Japan's Civilian Assistance Team to the Chaghcharan PRT in Afghanistan," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, April 17, 2009, http://www.mofa.go.jp/announce/announce/2009/4/1190656_1132.html (accessed February 20, 2018).

⁷Kuniko Ashizawa, "Japanese Assistance in Afghanistan: Helping the United States, Acting Globally, and Making a Friend," *Asia Policy*, Vol. 17 (January 2014), <http://www.nbr.org/publications/element.aspx?id=727> (accessed February 20, 2018).

⁸His Excellency Ambassador Shaida Abdali, "Strengthening India-Afghanistan Strategic Relations in an Uncertain World," Address at Brookings Institution India Center, New Delhi, India, April 25, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/events/india-afghanistan-and-connectivity-in-south-asia-address-by-h-e-shaida-abdali-ambassador-of-afghanistan-to-india/> (accessed February 20, 2018).

promote trade.⁹ More than 10,000 tons of fresh produce, fresh and dried fruits, medicinal plants, and other items worth more than \$20 million were exported to India in the second half of 2017 alone. In December 2017, a second air corridor was established between Kabul and Mumbai.¹⁰ Furthermore, India is active on the security front. In October 2011, Afghanistan and India signed a “Strategic Partnership” agreement, which allowed more than 4,000 Afghan officers to receive training in India.¹¹

Goals for the Quad

The Quad has worked closely together in Afghanistan since 2001 and has demonstrated a strong commitment to the mission there. The Quad shares many of the same goals in Afghanistan. These goals can be summed up with five “S”s:

- 1) **A sovereign Afghanistan.** In South and Central Asia, sovereignty equals stability and peace. This means respecting the sovereignty of others while being able to defend and enforce one’s own sovereignty. Today, outside countries like Pakistan, Russia, Iran, and China are eroding the sovereignty of Afghanistan by meddling in Afghanistan’s internal affairs.
- 2) **A stable Afghanistan.** The main goal of the international community in Afghanistan, if nothing else is achieved there, should be to create a stable-enough Afghanistan that is able to maintain its own internal security, in order to prevent the country from becoming a safe haven for terrorism in the way it was in the 1990s, without the help of thousands of foreign troops.
- 3) **A self-reliant Afghanistan.** Afghanistan has been the recipient of hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars in international aid—particularly from the Quad countries. While this is necessary, and in some form or another Afghanistan will need some international assistance for the near future, providing the current levels of support for Afghanistan is unsustainable in the long term. Whether it is with security or the economy, the Quad must find ways to help Afghanistan become more self-reliant.
- 4) **A secure Afghanistan.** The Quad has a direct national security interest in ensuring that the Afghans can eventually take control of their own security. This is a deadly region. According to the commander of U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, General John W. Nicholson, “Twenty of the 98 U.S.-designated terrorist groups in the world were in the

⁹HT Correspondent, “India, Afghanistan Launch Second Air Corridor Linking Kabul and Mumbai,” *Hindustan Times*, December 27, 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/india-afghanistan-launch-second-air-corridor-linking-kabul-and-mumbai/story-LF2ABpIZOomPf3VzqxzeN.html> (accessed February 20, 2018).

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Kenneth Katzman and Clayton Thomas, “Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service *Report for Congress*, December 13, 2017, p. 50, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL30588.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2018).

Af-Pak region (thirteen in Afghanistan and seven in Pakistan), making it the highest concentration of the terrorist groups anywhere in the world.”¹²

- 5) **A settled Afghanistan.** During his speech, President Trump alluded to an eventual political settlement “after an effective military effort.”¹³ The goal of any counterinsurgency is to allow those who have legitimate political grievances to address these grievances through a political process and not through violence. If the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan ever ends, it will be through a political settlement between the Afghan government and the Taliban.

The New Strategy

After entering office, President Trump instructed his Secretary of Defense, Jim Mattis, to propose a new strategy for the campaign in Afghanistan. After months of delays, on August 21, 2017, during a primetime speech at Fort Belvoir, President Trump outlined a new U.S. approach to the war in Afghanistan.¹⁴

There are four main points from the Trump Administration’s Afghan policy that are worth highlighting: rejecting arbitrary timelines, remaining committed and bolstering the training mission, lifting Obama-era restrictions on U.S. military involvement, and placing new pressure on Pakistan:

- 1) **Rejecting arbitrary timelines.** Crucially, President Trump made clear that, under his watch, progress in Afghanistan will be measured by conditions on the ground and not by a politically driven and artificial timeline. This is a major departure from when President Barack Obama announced in 2009 that U.S.- and NATO-led combat operations would end at midnight on December 31, 2014. One only has to look at what happened in Iraq in 2011, when the U.S. withdrew all forces based off an arbitrary deadline from the White House, to understand what would have happened if President Trump simply pulled out all U.S. troops from Afghanistan in a similar way.
- 2) **Remaining committed and bolstering the training mission.** The most important aspect of President Trump’s decision on Afghanistan was not only to remain committed to the training mission, but also to increase U.S. troops in Afghanistan as part of this mission.

¹²News transcript, “Department of Defense Press Briefing by General Nicholson in the Pentagon Briefing Room,” U.S. Department of Defense, December 2, 2016, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript-View/Article/1019029/department-of-defense-press-briefing-by-general-nicholson-in-the-pentagon-brief/> (accessed February 20, 2018).

¹³President Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia,” remarks at Fort Myer in Arlington, Virginia, The White House, August 21, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-strategy-afghanistan-south-asia/> (accessed February 20, 2018).

¹⁴Ibid.

The immediate criticism of this strategy was often based on the argument that 4,000 more trainers will not be able to do in 2018 what more than 100,000 U.S. troops were unable to do in 2011. This argument stems from an old way of thinking about America's role in Afghanistan. The war being fought in Afghanistan today is not the same war from 2001 or even 2009 (the year President Obama unveiled his Afghan strategy), when the U.S. was leading combat operations. Today, the Afghans are in the lead, and the U.S. mission is one of training, advising, and assisting. The Afghan security forces are that country's ticket to long-term security and stability.

If the Quad and its allies continue to mentor, train, and fund the Afghan military, the Afghans will be able to do a better job at taking on the insurgency themselves. Not only will this help the Afghans prevent their country from becoming a hub for transnational terrorism, but also will eventually establish the security conditions inside which a genuine political process can take place.

3) Lifting onerous restrictions placed by the Obama Administration on the way the military conducts the campaign. Approximately one-third of U.S. forces in Afghanistan are not part of the training mission but are involved in combat operations against the Taliban and associated groups, including Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant–Khorasan Province (ISIL-KP). The Trump Administration lifted many Obama Administration–era restrictions that military commanders found to be too risk averse. Also, the authority to determine U.S. troop numbers in Afghanistan is delegated from the White House to the Department of Defense, which is another departure from the previous administration.

The new strategy gives the U.S. military broader authority to use airstrikes to target Taliban militants and this change has already been obvious. Under the Obama Administration, the U.S. restricted the use of air strikes to cases when Afghan forces were under imminent attack. Now commanders on the ground can use airstrikes against the Taliban as they see fit. Between the date of the Afghan policy speech (August 2017) and December 31, 2017, around 2,000 airstrikes took place against the Taliban and associated groups—nearly as many as in all of 2015 and 2016 combined.¹⁵

The Obama Administration also restricted U.S. advisers and trainers to the higher headquarters that are far from the front line and the tactical situation on the ground. Under President Trump's proposal, new combat advisory teams are being created which

¹⁵Max Bearak, "A New U.S. Air Blitz in Afghanistan Isn't Stopping for Winter. But Will It Stop the Taliban?," *The Washington Post*, January 16, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/a-new-us-air-blitz-in-afghanistan-isnt-stopping-for-winter-but-will-it-stop-the-taliban/2018/01/16/c9bb874c-f4cd-11e7-9af7-a50bc3300042_story.html?utm_term=.d560cf78fd61 (accessed February 20, 2018).

can embed with Afghan Kandak (battalion) units operating on a tactical level in more dangerous places.¹⁶

4) **Placing real pressure on Pakistan.** It is clear that something must be done about Pakistan's succor to the Taliban and associated groups. According to the recently published *2018 Worldwide Threat Assessment*:

Militant groups supported by Islamabad will continue to take advantage of their safe haven in Pakistan to plan and conduct attacks in India and Afghanistan, including against US interests. Pakistan's perception of its eroding position relative to India, reinforced by endemic economic weakness and domestic security issues, almost certainly will exacerbate long-held fears of isolation and drive Islamabad's pursuit of actions that run counter to US goals for the region.¹⁷

After years of talk, the Trump Administration seems serious. As President Trump stated very clearly: "We can no longer be silent about Pakistan's safe havens for terrorist organizations, the Taliban, and other groups." This will likely be the hardest aspect of his strategy to achieve. Both of President Trump's immediate predecessors also made similar overtures regarding Pakistan, but neither delivered. Pakistan cannot have it both ways, and the Quad, in particular the U.S., has a great deal of leverage to use to help Islamabad change its ways. Over the past 15 years, the U.S.–Pakistani relationship has costed U.S. taxpayers more than \$33 billion, with very little in return.¹⁸ In January, the Trump Administration cut \$255 million in aid to Pakistan, which has been considered a warning shot if Pakistan does not change its ways.¹⁹

For the most part the Trump Administration's new Afghan policy was well received by members of the Quad.

Australian Defense Minister Marise Payne has welcomed it and did not rule out sending more troops to Afghanistan as part of the president's strategy.²⁰ India's Ministry of External Affairs

¹⁶Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, "Up to 1,000 More U.S. Troops Could be Headed to Afghanistan This Spring," *The Washington Post*, January 21, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/up-to-1000-more-us-troops-could-be-headed-to-afghanistan-this-spring/2018/01/21/153930b6-fd1b-11e7-a46b-a3614530bd87_story.html?utm_term=.6f6f0130566e (accessed February 20, 2018).

¹⁷Daniel R. Coats, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," testimony before the Select Committee on Intelligence, U.S. Senate, February 13, 2018, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Testimonies/2018-ATA---Unclassified-SSCI.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2018).

¹⁸Jeff M. Smith, "Pakistan's 'Double Game' Manipulation of U.S. Will—and Should—End Soon," *Heritage Foundation Commentary*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/pakistans-double-game-manipulation-us-will-and-should-end-soon> (accessed February 20, 2018).

¹⁹Jeff M. Smith, "Trump Just Cut Aid to Pakistan. Why This Long-Overdue Move Could Have a Real Impact," *Heritage Foundation Commentary*, January 5, 2018, <https://www.heritage.org/middle-east/commentary/trump-just-cut-aid-pakistan-why-long-overdue-move-could-have-real-impact> (accessed February 20, 2018).

²⁰David Wroe, "Donald Trump's Afghanistan Strategy Could See Australia Asked to Send More Troops," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, August 23, 2017, <http://www.smh.com.au/federal-politics/political-news/donald-trumps->

said that it welcomed President Trump’s “determination to enhance efforts to overcome the challenges faced by Afghanistan and in confronting issues of safe havens and other forms of cross-border support enjoyed by terrorists.”²¹ The Japanese Embassy in Washington, DC, released a statement that “Japan appreciates this new and comprehensive strategy regarding the US approach to South Asia for the stability of Afghanistan.”²²

The Security, Political, and Economic Situation

It is in the interest of the Quad that Afghanistan improves its security, political situation, and economic prospects if an enduring solution to the country’s problems is to be found. Tangible, albeit modest, successes on the security front are overshadowed by so-called “spectacular” attacks in the capital of Kabul. The 2014 presidential election and its subsequent so-called “National Unity Government” has tested Afghanistan’s constitution to its limits. Economic progress occurs at a snail’s pace, leaving the country still reliant on the international community.

Security. The security situation is a case of two steps forward, one step back. Progress made is usually eclipsed by major attacks in Kabul, where the bulk of the international media is located. In terms of the security situation, it is important to measure success by actual achievements on the ground and not unrealistic expectations held by many in the international community since 2001.

Unrealistic expectations on what many hoped Afghanistan to become after 2001 has led many to see only failure. With each attack in the nation’s capital, headlines of doom and gloom appear. However, a closer look at the situation shows that much has actually been achieved on the security front.

After the successful targeting of Taliban leaders at all levels, combined with a robust counterinsurgency campaign over the years, the group as a national movement has degenerated into several smaller, competing, and localized insurgencies—each with a different set of grievances and goals.

Even with the recent horrific attacks in Kabul, the level of violence in Afghanistan is nowhere close to its peak in 2011–2012. Al Qaeda, which once used Afghan territory with impunity before 2001, no longer enjoys a safe haven in Afghanistan from which to plan and launch terror

[afghanistan-strategy-could-see-australia-asked-to-send-more-troops-20170822-gylq69.html](#) (accessed February 20, 2018).

²¹Associated Press, “World Reacts to Trump’s Speech on New Afghanistan Strategy,” AP News, August 22, 2017, <https://www.apnews.com/496b2c0c1c1a4cdcbb146417bcc34139> (accessed February 20, 2018).

²²E-mail correspondence between The Heritage Foundation and the Japanese Embassy in Washington, DC, February 15, 2018.

attacks on a global scale. The threat posed to Afghanistan by the ISIL-KG is not even close to being in the same league as the Taliban, and pales in comparison to the terror group's other affiliates in Syria and Libya. No major terrorist attack originating from Afghanistan has been successful in any member of the Quad since 2001.

The Taliban that rolled into Kandahar and Kabul in the mid-1990s with tanks and planes is a shadow of its former self today. In 2001, outside a small rump of territory run by the Northern Alliance in northeast Afghanistan, the Taliban controlled the entire country. Today, according to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction's most recent quarterly report to Congress, the Taliban has "control or influence" over only 12 percent of the country's population.²³

Governance. In terms of the long-term viability of Afghanistan's governance, the current political situation is very concerning. While the National Unity Government brought hope for political stability in wake of the controversial 2014 Presidential Election, it is clear that a breakdown in trust and communication between President Ashraf Ghani and the newly created Chief Executive Officer, Abdullah Abdullah, is having a significant impact on Afghanistan's political progress. Infighting between the two camps has also led to security crises, like the temporary capture of Kunduz by the Taliban in 2016.²⁴ The mandate for the current Afghan parliament expired in 2015, but due to security concerns and the inability to guarantee a free and fair election, the mandate was extended by presidential decree. The next parliamentary elections are expected to take place in July 2018.²⁵

Recently, the dispute between President Ghani and the outspoken and capable, if not slightly controversial, governor of Balk Province, Atta Mohamed Noor, has brought the challenges faced by the government into the spotlight. Under the constitution, the president appoints the provincial governors. When Ghani (ethnic Pashtun) tried dismissing Noor (ethnic Tajik) in December 2017, a political crisis ensued with Noor refusing to step down and using his newfound publicity to lay the groundwork for a presidential bid in 2019.²⁶ In the short term, this political standoff has the potential to spill over into violence and remains unresolved at the time of this writing.

²³Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, pp. 76–117.

²⁴Abubakar Siddique, "Kunduz Fall Exposes Afghan Government's Vulnerabilities," *Gandhara*, September 29, 2015, <https://gandhara.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-kunduz-fall-exposes-government-vulnerabilities/27277553.html> (accessed February 20, 2018).

²⁵Reuters Staff, "Afghanistan to Hold Elections in July Next Year," Reuters, June 22, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-election/afghanistan-to-hold-elections-in-july-next-year-idUSKBN19D258> (accessed February 20, 2018).

²⁶Mujib Mashal, "The President, the Strongman, and the Next U.S. Headache in Afghanistan," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/15/world/asia/afghanistan-atta-muhammad-noor-president.html> (accessed February 20, 2018).

Exacerbating these political challenges are some fundamental flaws in the Afghan constitution written in 2004. For example, giving the right of the president to appoint provincial governors, instead of them being selected or elected locally, goes against the decentralized nature of Afghan governance dating back centuries.

In addition, the use of the single-non-transferable-vote to elect the members of the House of the People (the lower house in Afghanistan's bicameral legislature) in a country like Afghanistan presents problems. Since Afghanistan is a deeply tribal country with many different ethnic and societal groups (some of which, like females and Kuchi nomads, are elected on a quota system), the single-non-transferable-vote has created situations where candidates win their seat with less than 10 percent of the total vote.²⁷ There seems to be little appetite, by either the international community or the Afghan elite, to start a meaningful debate about amending the constitution or reopening electoral law.

Economy. The economic situation in Afghanistan remains a significant challenge that is made worse by the political and security situation.

While overall economic activity and standards of living have vastly improved since 2001, a lot remains to be done. Economic growth in 2017 was an unimpressive 2.6 percent.²⁸ Afghanistan is heavily dependent on international military and economic assistance and its living standards are among the lowest in the world. Afghanistan is also heavily dependent on remittances, which account for 10 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP). Afghanistan's legal exports include grapes and raisins, but the economy remains heavily dependent on illegal opium cultivation, which increased by 87 percent to a "record level" of 9,000 tons in 2017 compared with 2016 levels.²⁹

In 2010, the U.S. government estimated that there were \$1 trillion of untapped minerals in Afghanistan. The Afghan Ministry of Mineral and Petroleum revised this figure up to \$3 trillion. However, a lack of infrastructure and a poor security environment have prevented any meaningful mining. Currently, the mining sector accounts for only approximately 1 percent of Afghanistan's GDP.³⁰

²⁷Andrew Reynolds and John Carey, "Fixing Afghanistan's Electoral System: Arguments and Options for Reform," *Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit Briefing Paper Series* (July 2012), <http://sites.dartmouth.edu/jcarey/files/2013/02/RC-Fixing-Afghanistans-Electoral-System-AREU-2012-FINAL.pdf> (accessed February 20, 2018).

²⁸The World Bank, Data on Afghanistan, 1960 to 2016, <https://data.worldbank.org/country/afghanistan> (accessed February 20, 2018).

²⁹RFE/RL's Radio Free Afghanistan, "Afghanistan's Neighbors Pledge Cooperation on Security," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 14, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/afghanistan-neighbors-pledge-cooperation-on-security/29039494.html> (accessed February 20, 2018).

³⁰Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, pp. 5–6.

According to The Heritage Foundation's *2018 Index of Economic Freedom*, Afghanistan ranked as the 154th freest economy in the world.³¹ Economic freedom slightly improved from the year before, thanks to notable increases in investment, financial, and monetary freedoms, as well as a higher property rights score. Nevertheless, its ranking places Afghanistan's score well below the regional and world averages.³²

Landlocked Afghanistan suffers from a lack of connectivity with its neighbors, but this is slowly changing. Some regional trade and infrastructure projects in the works could bring significant benefits to the Afghan economy.

Delhi and Tehran signed an agreement in February 2018 allowing Indian access to Chabahar port in southern Iran. This included a \$1.6 billion commitment by India to invest in a rail link connecting the port to the Iranian town of Zahedan near the Iranian–Afghan border.³³ Chabahar will help Afghanistan link to the outside world by bypassing Pakistan. (Chabahar is just 90 kilometers (km) from the China-backed Gwadar port in Pakistan.) This level of engagement by India with Iran might raise some eyebrows in the U.S. However, Delhi's investment in Chabahar must be seen in the larger geo-political context facing India in the region, and not just through the narrow lens of Iran's nefarious activities in the Middle East or its nuclear program.

Currently, three rail links are operational in northern Afghanistan: one connecting Afghanistan with Uzbekistan and two connecting with Turkmenistan. A fourth link is expected to open later this year connecting Afghanistan with Iran.³⁴ These links will play a major role in Afghanistan's participation in future regional transit projects.

In December 2017, Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey signed the Lapis Lazuli Corridor Agreement. The goal of the Lapis Lazuli Corridor is to transport goods back and forth from Europe to Afghanistan in seven to nine days using a network of rail and ferries. According to the Afghanistan Chamber of Commerce and Industries, the transit of 80 percent of goods to Europe will be done by railway and across the Caspian and Black Seas by ship.³⁵

Another piece of good news is the Trans-Afghanistan Pipeline project, commonly referred to as the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India Pipeline (TAPI). Once completed, this pipeline

³¹Terry Miller, Anthony B. Kim, and James M. Roberts, eds., *2018 Index of Economic Freedom* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2018), pp. 72–73, <https://www.heritage.org/index/> (accessed February 20, 2018).

³²Ibid.

³³"India Signs Short-Term Lease at Chabahar Port," *The Maritime Executive*, February 22, 2018, <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/india-signs-short-term-lease-at-chabahar-port#gs.eUFscjM> (accessed February 23, 2018)

³⁴ITV News, "Afghanistan, Iran Rail Link to be Completed by March 2018," *ITV Afghanistan*, February 26, 2017, <http://www.itvnews.af/en/news/afghanistan/28077-afghanistan-iran-rail-link-to-be-completed-by-march-2018> (accessed February 20, 2018).

³⁵Zarina Mohammadi, "Five Nations to Sign Lapis Lazuli Corridor Agreement," *Tolo News*, November 15, 2017, <https://www.tolonews.com/business/five-nations-sign-lapis-lazuli-corridor-agreement> (accessed February 20, 2018).

could fundamentally change the natural gas connectivity of Central Asia. This proposed 1,700-km pipeline will someday carry natural gas from Turkmenistan to India and help to block Russian and Chinese hegemony over the region's energy market. Construction of TAPI was delayed by more than a decade due to security concerns in Afghanistan, but work has finally started this year on the Afghan section of the pipeline. In addition, a fiber optic cable will run alongside the pipeline. The Afghan government has increased security along the route and a Taliban faction operating in western Afghanistan has reportedly voiced support for the project.³⁶

The Way Ahead

It is time to be realistic about Afghanistan. For the foreseeable future, there will be an insurgency in some form in the Pashtun heartland of Afghanistan. This does not mean that the United States or its allies in the Quad have failed. It is simply a reflection of the reality on the ground and in the region. India has struggled with numerous ethnic and separatist insurgencies within its borders, some of them still ongoing. Until the mid-1990s, the U.K. faced an insurgency from the Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland.

So what does success look like in Afghanistan? Success in Afghanistan is not when 100 percent of its districts are under the complete control of the Afghan government or when there are no more suicide bombings. Nor is success in Afghanistan achieved when every road is paved, every girl goes to school, or everyone gets the right to vote. These things are very important in themselves, and the Quad should aspire to them, but they are neither the reasons why we went to Afghanistan nor the reasons why we should remain there.

Success is achieved when there is a stable-enough Afghanistan able to manage its own internal security, allowing the country to resist the establishment of terror bases that were there before. Nothing more and nothing less.

It is in the interest of the Quad to stay committed to Afghanistan. Too often, the international community has turned its back on Afghanistan. The failure to keep a residual force presence in Iraq post-2011 has had disastrous results. The Quad should make it clear that the international community will not make the same mistake in Afghanistan.

As long as certain parts of Pakistan's government continue to provide relief to the Taliban, the Taliban will never have enough pressure, or incentive, to enter into genuine peace talks with the Afghan government. The Quad must help pressure Pakistan to accept, and help with, a long-term political solution in Afghanistan.

The Afghan security forces are the key to Afghanistan's long-term security and the Quad should lead by example in the international community and continue supporting and funding them.

³⁶Editorial, "Afghan Gov't Beefs up Security before Major Gas Project's Inauguration in Herat," *Xinhua*, February 20, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-02/20/c_136986691.htm (accessed February 20, 2018).

Paraphrasing T. E. Lawrence on the Arabs in his famous *Twenty-Seven Articles*, it is better that the Afghans do it tolerably than we do it perfectly.³⁷ The strength and size of the Afghan security forces should be determined by security conditions on the ground. The international community should resist the temptation to reduce the Afghan security forces' size and capability for financial reasons.

The Quad should also continue with its aid commitments but ensure that financial assistance is delivered in a transparent and effective way. The U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction has uncovered dozens of cases of U.S. financial aid that never reached its intended recipient, or was used for inappropriate projects. Since 2002, the lack of accountability of U.S. assistance has played a major role in fueling Afghanistan's endemic corruption problem. The Quad must take measures to ensure that every taxpayer's dollar, rupee, or yen is utilized in the most effective way possible in Afghanistan. This will help build confidence with the public at home while helping the Afghans fight corruption.

The Quad should support regional transit initiatives that connect Afghanistan to the outside world. This is particularly true regarding Central Asia. Afghanistan is not part of the Middle East, and referring to it as part of the so-called "broader Middle East" is misleading. Culturally, historically, economically, and geographically, at least half of Afghanistan is part of Central Asia. To this end, the Quad should aim to work with the Central Asian Republics to improve the overall situation in Afghanistan.

The role of China and Russia should be closely monitored by the Quad. Russia has been supporting certain groups of the Taliban operating in northern Afghanistan for more than a year.³⁸ China is keen to get its hands on Afghan minerals and has terrorism concerns from the East Turkestan Islamic Movement, which is formed by members of China's minority Uighur community. The East Turkestan Islamic Movement operates in Afghanistan and is connected to the Taliban. It has been reported that Beijing plans to build a military base in the Afghan province of Badakhshan, which shares a 76-km-long border with China.³⁹ Russia and China's objectives in Afghanistan will go against the Quad's.

The goal of any counterinsurgency is to give those in society who have political grievances an opportunity to address those grievances through a political process and not through violence. When the time is right, the Quad should support the Afghan government if it chooses to come to

³⁷T. E. Lawrence, "Twenty-Seven Articles," *The Arab Bulletin*, August 20, 1917, http://www.telstudies.org/writings/works/articles_essays/1917_twenty-seven_articles.shtml (accessed February 22, 2018).

³⁸Sune Engel Rasmussen, "Russia Accused of Supplying Taliban as Power Shifts Create Strange Bedfellows," *The Guardian*, October 22, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/22/russia-supplying-taliban-afghanistan> (accessed February 20, 2018).

³⁹Kemel Toktomushev, "China's Military Base in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, January 18, 2018, <https://thediplomat.com/2018/01/chinas-military-base-in-afghanistan/> (accessed February 20, 2018).

a political settlement with the Taliban, but this will have to be a decision ultimately decided in Kabul—not Washington, DC, Tokyo, Delhi, or Canberra.

The Trump Administration’s approach is reasonable, realistic, and a responsible strategy to ensure that America and its allies achieve “an honorable and enduring outcome worthy of the tremendous sacrifices that have been made”⁴⁰ in Afghanistan.

The members of the Quad can play an important role in helping to meet the strategic security objectives in Afghanistan.

Ultimately, this will make the region and the Quad safer.

⁴⁰President Donald J. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia.”