

# Shifting or shirking responsibility?

## Bonn's second Afghanistan conference in perspective – A comment



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Nothing is straightforward in Afghanistan', for this remarkable finding of German Foreign Minister Dr. Guido Westerwelle in his policy statement to the German Parliament on the 15th December 2011, the international community needed 10 years, billions of dollars and cost thousands of human lives. After Bonn I in 2001, which was about dreams of security and freedom, one decade later Bonn II had to deal with realities on the ground, limiting the damage of another military adventure of the US and its allies.

On December 5th 2011, around 1000 delegates from more than 80 countries and 15 international organizations/regimes discussed the basic framework for a new phase of the international engagement in Afghanistan. But the overall aim of the conference was not to set concrete parameters for the country's future, it was more about finding a good story-line for the West to get out of Afghanistan as soon and as cheap as possible without losing face. Therefore, tremendous efforts were made to underline the achievements of the last decade as well as to give the impression that withdrawing combat troops would be leaving behind an almost stable country and an international community which would never forget Afghanistan again.

Being aware of this staged spectacle, a remarkably self-confident Afghan delegation aimed at extracting as many commitments as possible from the international community and in return offering almost nothing participated in the conference. However, the official purpose of the conference was to broaden the basis of cooperation between the international community and Afghanistan as well as to convince the Afghan government and people that they could trust the international community and that they will receive support beyond 2014.

In this light, Bonn II was envisaged to cover particularly the following three areas: Handing over responsibility for security from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), long-term international engagement including financial support and training for Afghan security forces, building-up of administration, economic development, and the continuation of the peace and national reconciliation process.

Due to various reasons, it is not surprising that regarding each of these issues – beside vague 'mutual commitments' – the conference did not produce any significant outcomes. There is a common understanding among the ISAF states that instead of deploying some tens of thousands of combat troops, it's time that the Afghans by themselves should fight the Taliban and other Opposing Militant Forces (OMF). This process, which is called a period of transition, will be finalized by the end of 2014. There is no doubt that the Afghan government has to gain full sovereignty and authority as soon as possible. But given the difficulties which the ANSF currently has had to face after security responsibilities were handed over in almost 30% to 40% of the territory, one might raise the legitimate question if the Afghan government will be able to maintain the monopoly over the use of force, ensure stability as well as protect the political system and its institutions. In other words, it is obvious that the decision to withdraw the international troops from Afghanistan was not based on a positive assessment of the security situation, meaning that ISAF fulfilled its mission and is leaving a stable and secure Afghanistan behind.

In contrast, the ISAF was not able to crack down on the Taliban and other OMF in the country which are starting to interpret the withdrawal as a forced retreat and claiming victory. Interestingly, the ISAF is now promulgating that a military solution is not possible and a political one is the only way forward. But, this of course must be an 'Afghan-led process', the buzzword of Bonn II. Here lies the real handing over of 'responsibility'. Taking into account the on-going insurgencies, high profile terrorist attacks, the killing of former President Burhanuddin Rabbani who initiated the negotiations with the Taliban, stiff resistance and controversies regarding the establishment of a Taliban-liaison office, all actors involved realize that peace and reconciliation is hardly feasible in the near future. As such, one must admit that it seems as if the ISAF lost twice: First, they were not able to implement a military solution; second they refused to take on the official responsibility to carry out a political solution. This is gaining momentum when one assesses the performance of the Taliban over the last decade, compared to the

ISAF and ANSF. Today's Taliban are not only stronger morally and psychologically than ever before, but also mightier in political, economic and military terms as well. For example, Taliban fighters get paid 30 to 50 per cent more on average better than members of the Afghan

military terms not an essential challenge to their own armed capabilities. Consequently from a Taliban point of view, one could argue that there is no need to enter a peace process. However, the fact that no Taliban representative was present at the latest Bonn conference

it creates suspicions about Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan. In other words, Afghans are becoming increasingly concerned that Islamabad might be not interested in cooperating with the international community since it has its very own strategy deviating

its foreign policy. This process needs time which nobody has or is willing to grant decision-makers - neither the civilians in Islamabad nor the generals in Rawalpindi. Nevertheless, the international community is aware that there will be no political solution for Afghanistan without Pakistan.

The regional determinants for Afghanistan's future are becoming even more complex with a view to Iran's plans. Being also very interested in a stable neighborhood, Iran played a relatively constructive role during Bonn II. But despite the fact that Iran's Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Saleh spared the conference with an all too open attack on the US, he made quite clear that his country will not accept the maintenance of foreign bases and troops in Afghanistan after 2014. In the light of this US-Iran hostility, the worsening of US-Pakistan relations, an Iran-Pakistan rapprochement, and the Indo-Pakistan rivalry, there is no doubt that the matrix of interests of major regional and non-regional players is quite complex, contradictory and will remain harmful to Afghanistan's development. Therefore, besides promises, there is no guarantee that the Afghan government can be assured that its neighbors will respect its sovereignty and territorial integrity. In other words, there is no assurance that attempts from abroad to undermine the autonomy of Afghan political decision-making will be stopped.

In retrospect, Bonn II did not have much to offer except the presentation of remarkable 'taboo topics'. For example, the term 'Taliban' did not appear in official statements during the conference.

Even more, the topic of Taliban was not discussed at all (at least not publicly), which is confusing since peace and reconciliation was a major issue. Another astonishing experience was that it seemed that any critic of President Karzai and his administration was cut from the agenda. This was an unfortunate phenomenon, since it seems that the current Afghan government developed a certain degree of resilience and resistance regarding the implementation of reforms and concrete anti-corruption measures.

This not only creates suspicion but also raises the legitimate question regarding the credibility of the Karzai commitment's towards democracy. In this context, one

should also scrutinize Karzai's ambitions to change the constitution in order to get reelected and stay in power for a third term in office as President. In this context, there are also plans of reshaping the Afghan central government. Changing the institutional design in such an unstable democratic landscape is an ambiguous and venturesome political exercise which might transform the constitution into a scapegoat for particular interests. Being neither a donor meeting nor a peace conference, but a conference which tried to set up the basic frame for future cooperation and development - one must wonder why the international community did not shed any light on the alarming patterns of democratic transformation.

Last but not least, on the issue of the international community's commitment towards a long-term engagement in the so-called period of transformation – the decade which follows the transition of responsibility (2014-2015) - serious challenges appear. Basically, the leading NATO/ISAF states are totally exhausted militarily, financially and politically. The governments are losing the support from their own people, especially from their respective electorates, for the on-going military mission. Furthermore, in the face of the economic and financial crisis of the US and EU, their politicians lack the room to maneuver to legitimate any kind of future engagement in Afghanistan. Subsequently, one must be aware that the US and EU are not only running out of arguments but also of financial resources for any kind of long-term engagement. Therefore, the donor conference in Tokyo in July 2012 will be the real 'Litmus test' for the future partnership between Kabul and the international community. To sum up, there is a slight perception that the West is not 'shifting' but 'shirking' responsibility. However, Karzai is once again achieving his central goal - keeping the cash flowing from the international community!

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National Army (ANA) and Afghan National Police (ANP). Furthermore, considering the insufficient equipment of ANA and ANP, the existence of local power centers with private militias, the tremendous tasks and security threats to deal with, it will be difficult for the central (civilian) government to keep the security sector loyal and under control. There are already numerous reports of members of the ANP defecting to the Taliban or other OMF. In this context, one must also ask if the Taliban are actually willing to enter a peace process. The Taliban are quite aware that the central government is losing legitimacy, its administration is ineffective and corrupt, and in

indicates the long and difficult way towards a political solution for future Afghan governments.

In this context, it was most unfortunate that the conference was overshadowed by Pakistan's boycott.

Islamabad's decision not to participate is a dramatic setback for any sort of peace and reconciliation process. First of all, Pakistan is becoming increasingly isolated in the region because of its arch rivalry with India, increasing disharmony between Kabul and Islamabad, and, despite improvements, a still ambiguous relationship with Iran. Dropping out of such an important international conference will isolate Islamabad even more. Second,

from Karzai's vision of peace and national reconciliation. Third, it indicates how volatile and fragile Pakistan's civil-military relations are, especially the unsteadiness of the civilian government. Therefore, one cannot help but feel that it seems as though Pakistan's Afghanistan policy is primarily dominated by short-term domestic determinants instead of a visionary long-term foreign policy. However, one has to understand that the political landscape in Pakistan is complex, and the political room to maneuver for the civilian elite as well as the military top echelon has become remarkably constricted. Basically the country needs to re-assess the fundamental determinants of