

Interview with Ashraf Ghani

Ashraf Ghani is the Chairman of Afghanistan's Security Transition Commission, a former Afghan presidential candidate and a former senior official at the World Bank.

Fareedoone Aryan (FA): Later this month there will be a NATO conference in Chicago. What do you think will be its future impact on Afghanistan?

Ashraf Ghani (AG): The conference will be a very important milestone. It's going to be the re-affirmation of the Lisbon consensus, that transition from international forces to Afghan forces will be complete by 2014. The issue of funding for Afghan security forces beyond 2014 will be affirmed in this conference. We have an enormous amount at stake. Most significantly, it would be the re-affirmation of a deepening and broadening of a partnership between the international community in general and NATO in particular with Afghanistan, as marked by the recently concluded strategic agreement between the United States and Afghanistan.

FA: There is a fear that if NATO withdraws from Afghanistan, Afghanistan will go back to the anarchy that was there – that there could be civil war. What is the state of the Afghan army? Do you think they will be able to assume control?

AG: I have been to every one of our army corps. I spent a significant amount of my time talking to divisions, brigades, to our corps commands and as well as all our security forces. Today we have a commando force of 12,000, at least. We have the next two years to constantly improve. The strength of the security force cannot be judged by penetration of terrorist elements against civilians. Its strength can be judged by the nature of response. I think that on Twitter and Facebook and the media, you've seen a remarkable embrace of the Afghan security forces by the public in general, and by the young generation in particular. This is the psychological key.

FA: There is also fear that if we drop the number of the Afghan army from 350,000 to 230,000 by the end of 2014, it will not be enough. Do you think it will be enough?

AG: Of course, it is the question of money. If we have 6 billion – and 6 billion compared to the one month of NATO expenditure is a very small amount – we will be able to maintain. This is condition related. It is not an absolute reduction that regardless of conditions we are going to bring about. Most significantly, it's about management. Our army is extraordinarily centralized in decision-making and if we delegated some of the decision-making to the corps commands and the brigades, I think we would be able to bring flexibility. Flexibility is needed.

FA: There have been incidents in the past and they are increasing of Afghan soldiers killing NATO troops. Why do you think it's happening and how can it be stopped?

AG: It's extremely regrettable and our prayers go to every family that has lost loved ones among the American public. This is a partnership of value between the United States and Afghanistan. We have common interests. Our interests are what have brought us together. It needs to be appreciated that the Afghan public has endured enormous sacrifices in this partnership and believes in it. The number of instances is very small. Our country is a country that has endured war for 30-40 years. You never know when psychological breakdown occurs. The army has now taken measures. A very significant effort is underway to prevent such unfortunate and tragic instances.

FA: The American-Afghan strategic partnership, how beneficial will it be to Afghanistan? Is it going to be money? Is it going to be military assistance?

AG: Money and military assistance subordinated to the value proposition. The key is common interest. What we have managed to achieve through this agreement is a close partnership with the world's most powerful country and one of the poorest countries but with a tradition of dignity, independence and honor. I think that in the annals of the agreement that have been concluded between the United States and others, this agreement is a guarantee that 2014 will be handled through continuity and a deepening of partnership, rather than rupture and sudden departure.

FA: You have been a key in devising some of the most successful strategies in Afghanistan's development. For example, all you have done at World Bank. Do you think American money aided by the western countries has been successful in Afghanistan? If not, what are the key issues for improvement?

AG: The nature of US assistance has been mixed. A major reason is the generosity – and it's been an extraordinary generosity by the American public and American government. It's been implemented through the mechanism of contractors around the Washington Beltway. In today's assistance, a private company, for instance in the building sector, takes a contract and makes no contribution other than to outsource it. So then there is salami-slicing where it goes down to six sub-contractors. By the time it reaches a poor Afghan contractor, the value has been reduced so the corresponding delivery has not taken place. President Obama is very keen to address this problem. This issue I brought to his attention. We have now an agreement to create very different mechanisms. But the other part of this is the corruption of our system – when ministers as brothers, as contractors, or kinsmen, or wives, or sisters – it does not create trust. We have a double problem. The cost for infrastructure where the United States has been helping us could be reduced four-fold.

FA: The conference of NATO in Chicago, what will be the implications in ordinary Afghan's lives?

AG: An ordinary Afghan if he is a man listens 92% to four radio stations a day. If she is a woman, 87% of them listen to four radio stations a day. So the ordinary Afghan is extremely engaged. Today, each time I go to villages, they are much better informed about international affairs. The Afghan public, I think, knows exactly what is at stake in Chicago. But more than anything else, the ordinary Afghan woman and man wants to know that we have a medium to long-term strategic relationship with the United States and NATO that is going to involve engagement with Afghanistan because their fear is one of abandonment. Chicago would be an affirmation to these Afghans. They will be able to plan their lives. Ordinary Afghans make decisions on whether to build a house, whether to buy land or whether to engage in a business depending on how the strategic relationship with the United States and NATO are formed. It has extraordinary implications and I hope that its success will again renew the environment of trust, investment and participation to make this a success.