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Congressional Committees

Afghanistan: Changes to Updated U.S. Civil-Military Strategic Framework Reflect Evolving U.S. Role

The U.S. Civil-Military Strategic Framework for Afghanistan is intended to articulate the strategic vision guiding U.S. government efforts to achieve U.S. national goals and to facilitate U.S. civilian and military cooperation and partnership in Afghanistan. The Department of State (State) notes that this framework serves as strategic guidance for all U.S. civilian and military personnel serving in Afghanistan. In March 2012, the framework replaced the Integrated Civilian-Military Campaign Plan, which was first signed in August 2009 by the U.S. Ambassador to Afghanistan and the Commanding General, U.S. Forces-Afghanistan. The framework was subsequently updated, in October 2012 and, most recently, in August 2013.¹

The August 2013 version of the framework—likely the final update, according to State officials—shows, among other things, a heightened focus on transition in Afghanistan.² The framework defines “transition” to mean a shift, through the end of 2014, in security responsibility for Afghanistan to Afghan security institutions and the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) as well as a shift in U.S. policy toward a more traditional diplomatic and development model. After January 1, 2015, when the last U.S. combat troops are expected to have withdrawn from Afghanistan, the United States plans to continue to support the government of Afghanistan in its efforts to achieve longer-term goals for governance and development. According to State officials, the 2013 revision of the framework was intended to reflect changes in U.S. goals and priorities, better align them with Afghan goals and priorities, and reflect changing circumstances on the ground.

Section 1220 of the National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2013 (NDAA) mandates GAO to report on any substantial updates to the campaign plan for Afghanistan, which the strategic framework has replaced.³ To satisfy the mandate, this report broadly compares the August 2013 version of the framework with the October 2012 version, summarizing the differences between them.

To conduct this work, we reviewed the October 2012 and the August 2013 versions of the Civil-Military Strategic Framework for Afghanistan to identify differences between them. To

¹ We previously conducted an analysis of the October 2012 framework. See GAO, *Afghanistan: Key Oversight Issues*, [GAO-13-218SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Feb. 11, 2013).

² According to State, the U.S. government will replace the August 2013 version of the framework with a more typical country-level planning document, known as an integrated country strategy, that State produces in other U.S. missions.

³ Pub. L. No. 112-239, § 1220, 126 Stat. 1632, 1991 (Jan. 2, 2013).

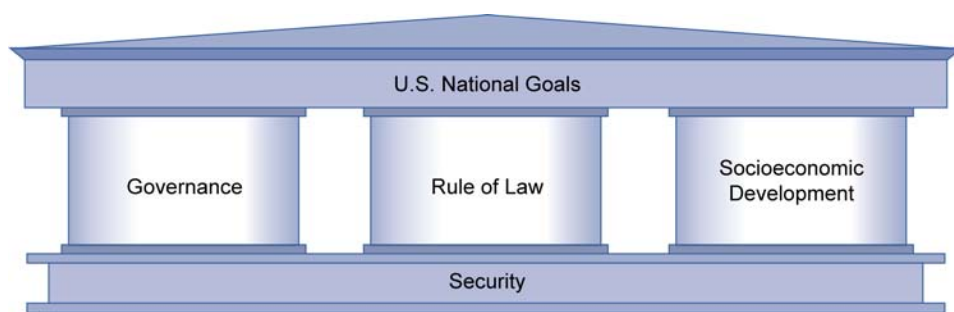
understand the reasons for the revisions, we interviewed State officials in Washington, D.C., and in Kabul, Afghanistan.

We conducted this performance audit from February 2014 to April 2014 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings based on our audit objectives.

Differences Between the October 2012 and August 2013 Versions of the Framework

Although there are similarities between the October 2012 and August 2013 versions of the U.S. Civil-Military Strategic Framework for Afghanistan, the two versions differ in several aspects that reflect, among other things, the U.S. government’s heightened emphasis on transition. Structurally, the two versions are broadly similar: both versions address four categories of U.S. efforts in support of U.S. national goals in Afghanistan, with security, the first category, as the foundation for the other three categories, or “pillars”—governance, rule of law, and socioeconomic development (see fig. 1). Both versions also address the same crosscutting issues—for example, recognizing and supporting the Afghan political reconciliation process and supporting policies and programs that continue to advance the essential role of women in Afghan society.⁴

Figure 1: Categories of U.S. Civil-Military Efforts in Support of U.S. National Goals in Afghanistan



Source: U.S. Departments of State and Defense.

Differences between the October 2012 and August 2013 versions of the framework include the following.

- **In the August 2013 version, the functions of the framework and statement of U.S. national goals have been modified to reflect changes in U.S. civilian and military efforts during and after the transition.** For example, the October 2012 version states that the second of the framework’s two primary functions is to ensure that U.S. civilian and military efforts in Afghanistan are fully integrated and complementary. In the August 2013 version, the framework’s second primary function has been reworded to “facilitate U.S. civilian and military cooperation and partnership in Afghanistan.” Similarly, the second of the two U.S. national goals has been reworded to reflect changes articulated by the President in

⁴ The other crosscutting issues identified in the framework focus on U.S. government efforts to, among other things, improve the Afghan government’s border management practices and its institutional capacity to facilitate legitimate trade; pursue information initiatives that enable credible and inclusive elections, promote the legitimacy of the Afghan government, counter violent extremism, and facilitate the transition; and bring greater stability to Afghanistan and the broader region.

May 2013.⁵ In the October 2012 version of the framework, the second U.S. goal was to build a partnership with the Afghan people to ensure that the United States could continue to target terrorists and support the Afghan government. In the August 2013 version, the second goal has been revised to “strengthen Afghanistan so that it can never again be a safe haven for international terrorism.”

- **The August 2013 version contains new information about the U.S.-Afghan partnership during and after the transition.** The August 2013 framework includes a new section about the U.S. government’s partnership with the Afghan government during the transition. The new section provides guiding principles emphasizing, among other things, the need for the U.S. government to align its efforts with Afghan national priorities; to ensure that the Afghan government can preserve gains in the U.S. government’s four categories of effort—security, governance, rule of law, and socioeconomic development; and to reinforce the U.S. and Afghanistan strategic partnership at every opportunity.

The August 2013 framework also includes a revised section on the United States’ plans for its partnership with Afghanistan in the decade after the transition. For example, the revised section notes that the U.S. government is committed to helping the government of Afghanistan achieve its long-term goals, including reducing dependence on international assistance, improving delivery of government services, and promoting fundamental freedoms and human rights. Specifically, the section notes that the U.S. government will focus on governance and socioeconomic development; training, advising, and assisting Afghan security institutions and the ANSF; and continuing counterterrorism efforts.

- **The August 2013 version includes new, transition-focused subsections for each of the three strategic pillars—governance, rule of law, and socioeconomic development—assessing the impact of reduced U.S. resources and presence on U.S. objectives and priorities.** For example, for socioeconomic development, the August 2013 version notes that there will be a shift away from capital-intensive U.S. socioeconomic infrastructure projects and priorities toward a focus on providing advice and assistance to the Afghan government. Regarding security—the foundational category of U.S. effort—the August 2013 version notes that U.S. and coalition forces intend to transition full security responsibility to the government of Afghanistan and assume a supporting role in Afghan-led security efforts. This shift is intended to enable the U.S. government to focus more on governance and development efforts in Afghanistan after the transition.
- **The August 2013 version provides fewer details about the future U.S. government footprint in Afghanistan, reflecting uncertainty affecting the U.S. post-2014 strategy.** For instance, the October 2012 version of the framework specified that the locations of the post-2014 U.S. footprint in Afghanistan would consist of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul and four field platforms, in Kandahar, Herat, Mazar-e Sharif, and Jalalabad. In contrast, the August 2013 version states that the U.S. footprint in Afghanistan will consist of the U.S. Embassy in Kabul, with additional representation at other locations as security and resources allow.
- **The August 2013 version replaces a section about measuring progress with a new section about civil-military coordination.** In the October 2012 version, the section about measuring progress stated that regular strategic assessments would be conducted to inform future revisions of the framework as well as U.S. government leadership in Afghanistan and

⁵ Remarks by the President at the National Defense University at Fort McNair, Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, Washington, D.C., May 23, 2013.

decision-makers in Washington, D.C. This section in the October 2012 framework also stated that the U.S. diplomatic mission in Afghanistan and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) would collaboratively assess qualitative and quantitative metrics and that interagency working groups would be responsible for further development, monitoring, and assessment of their respective sectors, such as security and governance.

In the August 2013 framework, the new section on civil-military coordination states that existing interagency working groups in Afghanistan monitor progress in addition to performing other functions. However, the August 2013 framework does not state whether regular strategic assessments of progress will be conducted and whether the U.S. Mission and ISAF will continue to collaboratively assess qualitative and quantitative metrics. State officials said that although they are no longer completing regular strategic assessments of overall progress, the individual interagency working groups are continuing to assess progress in their areas of responsibility as needed. In addition, State officials said that they plan to continue to collaboratively assess qualitative and quantitative metrics through the interagency working groups; however, collecting these metrics will become increasingly difficult as the transition date approaches. The officials stated that they expect resources to become more limited and that, because of the U.S. military drawdown, their access to locations outside Kabul will become more restricted.

- **The August 2013 framework excludes a list of strategic risks and of factors that could mitigate those risks.** The October 2012 version listed 13 strategic risks and mitigating factors related to a range of topics, such as economic growth, security, political will, and corruption. For example, one strategic risk was that “early withdrawal of U.S. and/or coalition forces before ANSF units are ready to replace them reverses security gains.” A mitigating factor for this risk was “sustain a U.S. and coalition military presence structured to support ANSF-led operations.” Unlike the October 2012 version, the August 2013 version includes a general discussion of two risks that may affect the achievement of U.S. national goals. These two risks are that (1) gains made in each category of effort may not be as robust as expected or preserved when the international presence declines after the transition and (2) the strategic planning assumptions the framework incorporates may prove invalid and the U.S. government may subsequently have insufficient time and resources to adjust. The August 2013 version identifies no mitigating factors. According to State officials, this change responded to comments from U.S. civilian and military personnel in Afghanistan. The State officials said that U.S. personnel had commented that all of their efforts in Afghanistan included some degree of risk and that the suggested mitigating factors were actions the U.S. government was already taking to implement the strategic framework. The officials noted that the absence of mitigating factors also reflects the need to collaboratively identify risk mitigations with the Afghan government as it works to assert its own strategic vision.

Agency Comments

We are not making recommendations in this report. We provided a draft of this report to State and the Department of Defense (DOD) for comment. State provided technical comments, which we have incorporated as appropriate. DOD did not provide comments.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees and the Secretaries of State and Defense. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <http://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-8980 or CourtsM@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. Key contributors to this report were Hynek Kalkus (Assistant Director), B. Patrick Hickey, and Kira Self. Also contributing to this report were Ashley Alley, Pedro Almoguera, Jacob Beier, Jonathan Fremont, Reid Lowe, and Marc Schwartz.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael J. Courts". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Michael J. Courts
Director, International Affairs and Trade

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