

# FLETCHER SECURITY REVIEW

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Editor in Chief, Fletcher Security Review  
[editor@fletchersecurity.org](mailto:editor@fletchersecurity.org)

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Suite 609 Cabot, Fletcher School  
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FSR Talks about  
The Afghan War  
with **General**  
**Joseph F. Dunford**

*General Joseph F. Dunford, Jr. assumed command of the International Security Assistance Force and United States Forces-Afghanistan on 10 February 2013. He previously served as the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps from October 2010 to December 2012. He is a graduate of the US Army Ranger School, Marine Corps Amphibious Warfare School, and the U. S. Army War College. He holds an M.A. in Government from Georgetown University and an M.A. in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. In an interview with FSR's Editor-in-Chief, Haider Mullick, General Dunford highlights the major challenges and opportunities in Afghanistan and the United States' broader national security strategy in the region.*

Note: This interview was conducted in December, 2013.

***FSR: Welcome General Dunford. Thank you for taking out time from your very busy schedule. I'll get straight to it: why are we in Afghanistan and why should we stay there?***

**Dunford:** Sure, Haider, we're in Afghanistan today for the very same reason that we came here back in 2001, because we had an enemy sanctuary in this part of the world, specifically in Afghanistan; the attacks of 9/11, the attacks in Madrid, the attacks in London emanated from this part of the world and of course from the US perspective it was clearly the 9/11 attacks that caused us to come here in order to deny Al Qaeda the freedom of movement to plan and conduct operations from Afghanistan.

***FSR: Still, given that Usama bin Laden is dead, Al Qaeda's numbers have depleted, and only 28% of Americans believe the war in Afghanistan is worth fighting for (July 2013 ABC Poll), why should we remain in Afghanistan?***

**Dunford:** Well, Haider, back to the original reason we came here, the core interest will be to continue to deny sanctuary of Al Qaeda here, and the method of doing that is to continue our work of developing sustainable Afghan security forces, and a sustainable political transition that will ensure that the Afghans can deny [Al Qaeda] sanctuary.

Then, more broadly, to be effective in the long term, clearly the counter-terrorism capacity of Afghanistan is a piece of it, the counterterrorism capacity of Pakistan is a piece of it, and frankly I think a successful relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan is key to our success. And so, one of the things we're also doing here is making what's today a trilateral relationship between US forces in Afghanistan, the Pakistani military, and the Afghan military, and developing an effective bilateral military-to-military relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan that can be one of the foundational elements of the broader strategic partnership between the two countries.

***FSR: How can the United States promote a stronger Afghanistan-Pakistan partnership in an atmosphere of mistrust?***

**Dunford:** First of all, Haider, I think you understand that extremism is not just a challenge for Afghanistan, it's a challenge for Pakistan as well, and so one of the first things that I think is important, and we're working on this very hard, is to ensure that Afghanistan and Pakistan have a common understanding of the threat of extremism in the region, that will obviously set the foundation for a relationship of cooperation in dealing with extremism. Extremism is a threat, again, to both countries. We today have a trilateral relationship, have made a lot of progress in that relationship since November of 2012 in particular, we established a standard operating procedure between the three parties to deal with the border area, and mitigate the risk of miscalculation and violence in the border area. But, more importantly, we're using that relationship to develop broader military-to-military engagement, and develop trust, and eventually develop complementary actions on both sides of the border, again to deal with what I fundamentally believe is a common threat.

And so, on the surface, some people look at that relationship and see challenges, as you alluded to, and I'm not being Pollyanna-ish here, but I actually see opportunity, because I do think that both

Afghanistan and Pakistan do recognize the threat of extremism. I think Pakistan has increasingly recognized that over the past 18 to 24 months, and frankly I think both nations, as evidenced by [Pakistani] Prime Minister Sharif's recent visit, and by the rhetoric that has come out of both Islamabad as well as Kabul, I think both nations have now identified dealing with extremism as one of their top priorities in their bilateral relationship. And I frequently meet with the Army Chief of Staff, in Pakistan – before he retired, I met with General Ashfaq Kayani at least once a month over the past year, and by coincidence, I was in Pakistan today [Dec 16, 2013]. I met with General Raheel Sharif, the new Army Chief of Staff, we spent well over two hours together today, and I met with the new Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Rashad Mahmood, as well.

Further, we've been able to use this bilateral relationship to expand and establish a bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the US bilateral relationship with both countries, and then the trilateral relationship that we have on some of the security issues, is really, at the end of the day, a foundation for an effective bilateral relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan. For example, on a couple of my visits to Pakistan, the Afghan Chief of the Army Staff has accompanied me when I went over to visit with General Kayani, and I expect that General Raheel Sharif and his leadership will come to Ka-

bul here very soon, and that the Afghan leadership will return those visits. And so, I think right now, particularly over the last year, 18 months, we have begun to lay the foundation for a much more effective [military to military] relationship between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

***FSR: How are you facilitating the Afghan-led reconciliation between Kabul and the insurgents, particularly the Afghan Taliban, and how is that shaping the Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship?***

**Dunford:** First of all, in order for this conflict to come to the right end, there's going to have to be a peaceful settlement, and so, we actively support that and it's certainly one of our government's top priorities, reconciliation, and you exactly got it right – it's going to be an Afghan-owned, Afghan-led process. That's something Pakistan has stated openly, that's something the United States has stated openly, so the US and Pakistan position is completely in support of Afghanistan's position that it's Afghan-owned and Afghan-led.

I think, frankly, that the most important thing we're doing in the military campaign is setting the conditions for a peaceful settlement. I personally believe that, as it becomes clear to everyone in the region that there will be stability and security in Afghanistan, that there will be a united country in Afghanistan, that the Afghan security forces will be capa-

ble of providing security to the Afghan people, and that the political process will result in a mature -- hardened if you will -- government here in Afghanistan, I think that increases the prospects for reconciliation. So, I think, in that regard, the military campaign is a supporting effort.

***“Extremism is not just a challenge for Afghanistan, it’s a challenge for Pakistan as well, and so one of the first things that I think is important, and we’re working on this very hard, is to ensure that Afghanistan and Pakistan have a common understanding of the threat of extremism in the region.”***

Clearly, the actual reconciliation process is led by the US State Department in terms of the US contribution, but we certainly facilitate in terms of relationships and, again, conditions on the ground, I think, at the end of the day, are the most important contributions we make to the peace process.

***“I personally believe that, as it becomes clear to everyone in the region that there will be stability and security in Afghanistan, that there will be a united country in Afghanistan, that the Afghan security forces will be capable of providing security to the Afghan people, and that the political process will result in a mature — hardened if you will — government here in Afghanistan, I think that increases the prospects for reconciliation.”***

***FSR: From our discussion it is clear that some American troops in Afghanistan are essential to sustain progress and deny sanctuary to terrorist groups. How do you view the critical Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA), and the upcoming Afghan national elections in April 2014?***

**Dunford:** First of all, Haider, I was on the negotiating team for the BSA. We worked very hard picking up from the team that had been working in Washington for the better part of a year. We picked up here in Kabul in September [2013], and we worked very hard on a document that would address both US and Afghan interests and we were successful, in that regard. I think with regard to the BSA, it’s important to emphasize that the Loya Jirga was conducted, it overwhelmingly supported the BSA; depending on what polling data you look at, somewhere between 75% and 90% of the Afghan people support the BSA; I believe that all the presidential candidates support the BSA, and some have come out openly with that support – all of them participated, by the way, all [presidential candidates] were invited to participate, in the Loya Jirga, and many of them did, so they were also participants in that regard and expressed their support through the Loya Jirga.

And then, when you look at the region, Pakistan supports the BSA, India supports the BSA, China has come out in support of the BSA, Russia supports the BSA, the Central Asian states support the BSA, Iran has said that they recognize Afghanistan’s sovereign right to enter into any agreement that’s in their best interest. So, I think the conditions for setting the BSA are there, it hasn’t yet been signed, but I believe that it’s inevitable that it will be signed – it’s inevitable that it will be signed because even President



Karzai set the conditions for a successful Loya Jirga with his opening speech in which he identified the reasons why Afghanistan must have the BSA to secure its future.

So, I think it's a matter of time. Frankly, who's suffering in the interim right now is really the Afghan people, with the delay, because, what we see here in Kabul is an inflationary crisis for basic staples, firewood and food and those kinds of things, we see a devaluation of real estate, we see a devaluation of the Afghani, Afghanistan's currency, and so, those difficulties are there, and also feed the bit of the uncertainty in the Taliban narrative of abandonment. But I am confident that the BSA will be signed in time. When you think back in September, I will just tell you that most of the pundits, and you may remember this yourself, all thought that there was a high probability that the BSA would not be approved by the Loya Jirga, and if nothing else, they thought that it would be a close-run thing. And in the event, it wasn't close at all – it was an overwhelming endorsement of continued US and, frankly, international presence, because the BSA is one of the documents that's a manifestation of the long-term commitment; the other document is of course the NATO (Status of Forces Agreement) SOFA, and I believe that'll be signed right on the heels of the BSA.

So, you correctly identify the BSA as critical, and that is the document that will

provide the framework for our presence post-2014. President Obama has made it clear that without a BSA we can't be here in Afghanistan, but, for all the reasons I mentioned in terms of what it will do for the Afghan people, what it will do for our interests here in the region, and what it will do to contribute to regional stability, I feel very confident that that BSA will be signed.

Let me switch gears, I guess, with regard to elections [in April 2014], and tell you that I'm very encouraged. Starting last summer with the passing of the legislation in time, and then the announcement of the candidates that occurred back in October and now, a very vibrant political process that's ongoing here in Afghanistan, I feel very good about where we are with regard to elections. And then, with regard to security, the Minister of the Interior here, former ambassador to Pakistan, former ambassador to Iran, former chief of staff here in the Palace, Minister Umar Daudzai, as the Minister of Interior he's responsible for security, and I can tell you we are months and months ahead of where we were in 2009 for election security.

Inclusivity, of course, is one of the key elements—inclusive, credible, and transparent elections are what we're looking for—inclusivity is really what we contribute to, from the security perspective. We are supporting the [Ministry of Interior] MOI, and I think there are three parts of inclusivity: one part is obviously





security and access to the polls, and every week now, on Saturday, the Minister of Defense, the Minister of Interior, the Director of [National Directorate of Security] NDS and myself get together and one of the key topics is election security. So right now, Afghan security force operations are very much focused on setting the conditions for people to have access to the polls.

Also, political leadership in Afghanistan has ensured that people understand that their vote matters, and the future of Afghanistan truly is something that they can contribute to. And so, ensuring that we don't have voter apathy is the second piece of inclusivity, and then closely related to that is what the [Independent]

Elections Commission is doing here and that is providing people with the knowledge they need to participate in the process. So frankly, you know, here it is, December of 2013, the elections are on April 5th of 2014, and again, we very carefully analyzed where we were in 2009, and we're far, far ahead of where we were in 2009, and my sense here in Afghanistan is that there is – and I think it'll increasingly become the case – there is an enthusiasm and energy to participate in the process, and people do want to have a say in the future of their country.

*FSR: Election security is a good segue into Afghanistan's broader security and the condition of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF). How do you assess the ANSF, their viability amid a largely aid-dependent Afghan economy and other challenges? Are there any indicators of progress?*

**Dunford:** Well, starting with the good part is, I think, as you probably know, in June of this year, we recognized Milestone 2013, and that was a follow-up to the Lisbon conference in 2010. And on that date, June 18th of this year [2013], the Afghan security forces assumed responsibility for security across the country. And through this summer, the Afghan security forces successfully protected the Afghan people and provided security in the key populated areas, the major cities and other key populated areas, and they maintained free- dom of

movement along the major highways and so forth, and frankly, this summer, in terms of level of violence, was not much different from 2012. The single biggest difference was officially, the Afghan forces were responsible for security.

At the beginning of the summer, we identified two goals with regard to the Afghan forces that were important to move forward in the campaign: one was that the Afghan security forces were confident in their capability, and the second goal was that the Afghan forces were credible in the eyes of the Afghan people. And I can tell you with confidence that we achieved both of those goals. The Loya Jirga actually was a capstone event for Afghan security forces, over the course of several weeks they set the conditions for a peaceful and secure Loya Jirga. During the event, they moved 3,000 people in and out of the facility, and there was not a single security

incident, which was indicative of their increased capability, the cooperation amongst the National Directorate of Security and Ministries of Interior and Defense, and I also think it's an indicator for how successful they'll be in securing the actual elections [April 2014].

Having said that, there's a very real challenge. The Afghan forces over the last couple of years have been focused on quantity, fielding the force – we grew the force from less than 200,000 in

about 2008 and 2009 to 350,000 police and soldiers today, along with an additional 20,000 plus Afghan local police force [part of the Village Stability Operations initiative]. So we have probably 370,000 Afghan security forces now, but we fielded them in a very short period of time. So we actually have some quality issues now that we have to focus on, and that's really where we are. For the last few years we focused on quantity, and that allowed us to get the Afghan forces out in the lead, that allowed us to have the Milestone 2013 [when Afghan forces took lead of country-wide security].

But the capabilities that we have today are not yet sustainable. And so, it starts with the ministerial capacity, you know, we use terms like planning, programming, budgeting, acquisition, and since you teach at the Naval War College, I know you're familiar with all of those, but basic things like being able to anticipate material requirements, having the processes in place to contract and purchase those requirements, and then of course the planning, programming, and budgeting process that will allow you to take the resources you have available and prioritize those for capabilities development. That's one of the things we're working on. So, today, making a connection between the ministerial level and the tactical level to ensure the tactical level is properly supported by the ministerial level is actually where we're working. There are also some very real capability gaps that will

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continue to exist after 2014. We’ll keep working on the intelligence enterprise, that’s intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance [ISR]. Their close-air support, in 2014, we’ll actually be delivering the first of their attack airplanes, but the entire aviation enterprise won’t be complete until late 2016, early 2017, so that will remain a gap. Then, as I mentioned,

inadequate ministerial capacity. So the three remaining challenges, really, are in those areas I just mentioned: the ministerial capacity, the aviation enterprise, and broadly speaking their intelligence enterprise.

But the positive news is that, with regard to their ability on a day-to-day basis to provide security to the Afghan people, they’re in pretty good shape. So, again, near-term: able to provide security; long-term: some sustainability issues, and that’s our focus not only now but into the support mission that will begin in early 2015.

***FSR: Given ISAF’s broad mission in Afghanistan, what are the three major challenges and three major indicators of progress?***

**Dunford:** Well, I’ll tell you what, there are probably three indicators of progress that come to mind right away. The first is the maturation of the political process that I believe will lead to political transition. And we’ve come a long way in that regard, I think the Afghan state is now mature enough to hold elections here in 2014 and allow the Afghan people to determine their future. Frankly, from that will come many other aspects of progress. The second one is the status of the Afghan security forces. As you probably know, there were no Afghan security forces in 2001, and the very first battalion of the Afghan Army was established in 2002. So a force of

600 in 2002 has grown into a force of 350,000. And during that same time they've gone from the coalition leading operations to eventually partnering operations between the Afghans and the coalition forces, to today when Afghans are leading operations. And what you probably ought to know is that we're not conducting any coalition or US unilateral operations today. All operations are led by Afghan security forces. We conduct operations only for our own security. So, again, number one, maturity of the political process, number two is the security transition overall, but the main evidence for that is the status of the Afghan security forces.

And I'll be honest with you; I think I have to put up there in the top three the hope of the Afghan people in the future. After three decades of war, I think the Afghan people recognize that in 2013, with the progress that's been made, and I could go through a number of statistics but you have all those available to you – in terms of how many children are in school now; cell phone users, numbers of roads, access to medical care, and all of those metrics that demonstrate improvement – frankly, more important than any specific physical manifestation of improvement is the fact that the Afghan people now look towards the decade of opportunity, which is what we call 2014 to 2024, and the fact that the Afghan people, after three decades of war, actually have some hope for the future, that has to be, in my mind, one of

the top three progress indicators.

That said, there are three major challenges: the first one would be sustaining the international community's support for Afghanistan into that decade of opportunity [2014-2024] – that's going to be critical; you mentioned the Afghan security forces getting paid and so forth and the Afghan economy is going to need some work here. I think the military campaign is providing the space within which that progress can be made after 2014, but, certainly some significant economic challenges and I think that increasingly young people here in Afghanistan are much more concerned about jobs for the future than they are about the Taliban. So I think sustaining that international community's support long enough for Afghanistan to complete security transition, to complete the political transition, but obviously to build their economy to the point where both of those processes are sustainable is important. The second challenge, and I mentioned it earlier when we talked about Afghan forces, but as much as I would identify as one of the indicators of progress the current state of the Afghan security forces, I'd identify a challenge making sure that that progress that we've made to date is enduring, and so the sustainability of Afghan forces is the number two challenge. And then the number three challenge really gets at the reason why we're here in the first place. That is the dynamic of extremism in the region, is in the top three challeng-

es right now that must be addressed, not only for progress in Afghanistan but progress in the region as a whole.

***FSR: Finally, what lessons learned from the collaborative efforts between coalition troops to rebuild the Afghan security sector do you think should be applied to similar, joint efforts in other nations emerging from conflict?***

**Dunford:** I think on the positive side one of the critical lessons learned is that despite the challenges of coalition warfare, it is absolutely the right thing. It happens over time, as you know, it wasn't always as effective, but over time, we've built an extraordinarily effective coalition. We have 48 nations that are actually contributing troops on the ground; that number has been as high as 50, over the last couple years. And that has brought, I think, an extraordinary capability to Afghanistan, and I would attribute the strength of the coalition, both in terms of the resources that they bring, as well as the assistance that they provide in building Afghan security forces has been very positive. Many nations make great contributions, you know, I could point to the Czech Republic and the help that they're providing in Mi-17 helicopter training to Afghan forces. I could point to the linkages in the relationship between the Turks and the Afghans; there's a national affinity between Turkey and Afghanistan; I could point to the special operations of Australia, and the United

Kingdom, and others; you could point to Germany and Italy, which obviously both have very strong relationships with the Afghan people and they've made an extraordinary commitment; and I could go on and on. But I honestly believe that one of the key things that we all ought to take out of this experience on the positive side is that, again, despite the challenges of cobbling together a coalition, and despite the fact that that has its inherent challenges, overall, on balance, the strength of the coalition has actually directly resulted in the progress that we've made to date. ©





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