

## The Problem and Promise of Afghanistan

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A little over seven years ago, I arrived in Kabul to be the United States Ambassador. When I stepped off the plane at one end of the runway, security personnel quickly took me by both arms to keep me from stepping off the tarmac. After we carefully picked our way through mines, unexploded ordinance and piles of destroyed aircraft and armaments, we proceeded along the road that led from the airport to the American embassy. The scene was not unfamiliar to me from previous assignments in war zones: burned out buildings, destroyed infrastructure, the litter and left-behinds of military campaigns. What caught my eye, however, were the carefully painted new signs along the road. They advertised tire repair, welding, machine shops, and other unglamorous basic services that were going on in the primitive shops behind them. I thought to myself, “these people have nothing, but they have hope and they have commitment.” I knew that the mission in Afghanistan would be difficult, but not how difficult it would be. I knew that it would be costly, but not that Afghanistan would be short-changed all along the way. And I knew that it would depend on the belief of the Afghan people that change could and would come and bring a better life and peace to Afghanistan.

For the first few years, it appeared that the promise would be fulfilled. The Taliban withdrew, and it seemed in 2003 that the actual fighting would lessen or disappear within a year or so. The optimism this engendered led to a “light-foot approach” to Afghanistan that took as its starting point a belief that only a little needed to be done and the problems of Afghanistan would take care of themselves. Washington diverted its attention and its resources to Iraq, and Afghanistan has paid the price in a number of areas, as neither sufficient funding nor personnel were made available.

One of these areas is the lack of civil and structural development. In Afghanistan, the need grew geometrically, while funding always arriving late and less than needed. Since the effort in Afghanistan began, the gap between need and funding has been fairly consistent. The international community pledged half of what the Afghans needed and then actually delivered only half of that. In addition, most of that funding actually was spent outside of Afghanistan, particularly U.S. funding. U.S. law requires U.S. firms to receive much of the contracting, so a tiered system has developed, where the United States Agency for International development (USAID contracts to American firms who then contract to other firms, perhaps Turkish or Pakistani, who in turn then contract to Afghan firms. Each firm takes its cut of the contract, say fifteen percent. The result is that actual funds disbursed in Afghanistan to Afghans are substantially less than the amount of money disbursed for Afghanistan.

The world community also arrived in numbers, both as soldiers and as government officials, members of non-governmental organizations and traders from neighboring countries. All arrived with visions and missions exceeding resources and personnel. To date a mixture of progress and failure has occurred. Partly, geography has determined destiny. The physical difficulties of

Afghanistan, a mountainous country whose few roads were destroyed, make basic communication and transportation difficult and expensive propositions. In the former Yugoslavia, fine roads and substantial housing, a developed infrastructure and an educated population made refurbishing after the war a relatively simple proposition. What geography didn't limit, sparse funding did. Bosnia-Herzegovina received over \$279 per capita in the first two years after peace was made, and East Timor \$256. In Afghanistan, the figure was \$67. According to the Congressional Research Service, spending for Afghanistan through FY 2009 comes to about two hundred billion dollars, of which 94 percent has gone for military spending and only 6 percent for embassy programs and development assistance. Lack of development is one of the major complaints of Afghans.

What is more, millions of Afghans have returned home from Iran and Pakistan, the largest refugee return in history. Some four million have come back, but millions more remain abroad, in poverty and now unwelcome. Iran has been pushing refugees back into Afghanistan in the last year, and Pakistan has begun to do the same. In addition, there are now tens of thousands of refugees from the Pakistan tribal areas who have fled the fighting and Taliban takeover there. The land they have come to is desperate. It was one of the poorest countries on earth before thirty years of war, and remains at or near the bottom on almost every human indicator.

In many measures, Afghanistan has made remarkable advances. Income has trebled, to about \$365 per year, compared to \$527 in its neighbor Tajikistan, and \$900 in Pakistan. 80 percent of Afghans now have access to some kind of health care, although life expectancy is still only 43 years and 16 percent of Afghan women will die giving birth during their lives. Infant deaths have declined 18 percent, but one of four children still dies before the age of five. In 2001, there were only a few thousand mostly non-working phones in Afghanistan, now 55 percent of the population has access to a cell phone and 38 percent report access to a television. Electricity is extremely limited however, even for those who are connected to the grid. There are now over five million children in school, some 60 percent of school age children. In primary school over fifty percent of the students are girls, but in secondary schools, that falls to five percent.

The Bonn program of elections and constitution has been implemented, a national army is showing promising signs, and a number of governmental institutions are in place. When one compares Afghanistan in 2007 to Afghanistan in 2001, there is much that has been done. There is even more that has not been done. Gains in women's rights and a free press remain fragile. Recent events make this particularly clear. Afghanistan is still near the bottom of the world in most development indices and the security situation becomes more troubling each day. Pakistan is now essentially threatened by the same militant activity as Afghanistan, and the recent concentration in that country of attacks on Shiite mosques brings in a regional aspect to the problems there as well. The stability of Afghanistan, and of the region, is not assured.

Yet, the shop owners along the airport road in Kabul are still there. They have witnessed terrorist attacks, an endless procession of high level visitors, an upgrading of the road and traffic jams. Whether the international community succeeds in Afghanistan or not, they will still be there.

The polling figures show that Afghans are growing less pleased with the direction in which their country is going, less pleased with the presence of foreign troops in their country and less

pleased with the United States' efforts to help Afghanistan. But they also show that the people of Afghanistan do not want the Taliban and al Qaeda, that in spite of their increasingly vocal complaints about bombing, corruption and poor governance, 82 percent say they still prefer the current Afghan government and only 8 percent say they approve of the Taliban.

During my time there, many people in Afghanistan, on all levels of society, told me the same thing. They said, "We want you to be here. We want you to succeed. But many others have come here and did not succeed, and we will always be here. If you do not succeed, and we want you to, we will have to find a way to live anyway. It is they who are the stability of Afghanistan, and it is we who have the chance, the power and the obligation to make an Afghanistan that is not a platform for international terror by creating an environment in which that does not happen again.

They look to their own government and the international community for stability, for assurances, political and economic, that they have a future they can move towards, and not a recurrence of the nightmare from which they have escaped, a nightmare which is now being implemented in the Swat district of Pakistan next door. They see the problems and the inadequacies around them, and often do not understand how nations so powerful and rich could have been so incapable in resolving these issues.

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The problems of Afghanistan are at least as perplexing to us as well. The criticisms of Afghanistan and the Karzai government are now familiar. Lack of governance is one of the main complaints of the Afghan people. Bad governance is another. The Kabul government is often not present in the provinces and when it is, it is most likely to be in the form of corrupt police officials or local power lords who have received a mandate to govern from Kabul but who are in fact simply continuing tribal and group power structures that have existed previously. In some ways, this is acceptable, as the Afghan people have long been used to rule themselves through tribal councils and by traditional methods. In many other ways, and particularly with regard to women's rights, it is not.

Presidential elections will be held this summer. Whoever the candidates are, but it is imperative that the U.S. not be identified with any particular candidate, for a whole range of reasons. The Afghans must choose for themselves, and the world community must help them to do so. The U.S. government should not be seen as interfering in the process. The perception that President Karzai was the U.S. choice in the last election has been used against both him and the United States in Afghanistan's domestic politics. Afghanistan must choose for itself, and govern its own house.

After seven years of war in Afghanistan, President Obama has brought a clear focus and statement of intent to the issues of the region. The analysis of the new initiative is that the focus will be on defeat of the Taliban and Al Qaeda and removal of the military threat to Afghanistan which they represent. Additional U.S. forces will go to Afghanistan, while repeated calls on NATO allies to increase their own commitments have mostly gone unanswered. The brunt of the fighting in Afghanistan has been done by the U.S., U.K. Canada, Netherlands and France. Other nations have restricted their soldiers with caveats that limit them to defensive, assistance or auxiliary functions. European leaders have not made it clear to their voters that the action is a war, and not a social assistance program. Even support for this is waning. Along with the emphasis of the new plan on a concerted military effort to deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan, is the recognition that Pakistan and Afghanistan now constitute a shared region of conflict, as Ambassador Holbrooke has clearly pointed out. The war is spreading, not ending.

Pakistanis, however, do not like to be linked with Afghanistan in this regard. Pakistani public opinion still persists in regarding the fundamentalist activities in their country as a United States problem. Recent news reporting has detailed the social disruption caused by the fundamentalist activities in Swat, where Islamic activists have targeted the ruling landlord class and either killed or driven them out of the area. This aspect of their activities, a social revolution in a country where hereditary landholdings and an impoverished peasant class are the norm, promises to spread to other areas of Pakistan as well. When I served in Pakistan twenty years ago Taliban groups were forming and politicians, many of them still active today, were trying to use those groups to thwart their political rivals. It was clear to me then that they would themselves become the victims of these groups, which saw all of them, landlords and industrialists, as bad Moslems and exploiters. Pakistan is in a serious state of crisis, with a weak government, a collapsing economy and a military which has been ineffectual in fighting the militants and at the same time, in its ISI branch, accused of colluding with them against the U.S. The new American plan includes large sums of money for Pakistan. Who will administer those funds and how they will be controlled is of critical importance. The old ways did not produce the results sought by the United States.

Returning our thoughts back to Afghanistan, President Obama has also called for a significant increase in the civilian presence in Afghanistan and in assistance for development. The personnel to staff these positions are now in the process of being identified. The office the State Department set up several years to deal with crisis situations was not funded until this fiscal year, so the process is not where it should be. The Secretary of Defense asked Congress in March of 2009 to ask it to fund the Department of State to relieve pressure on his personnel. He should not have had to do that. Considering the situation on the ground, an immediately accelerated effort is necessary. A number of commentators abroad noted the new plan seems more designed to produce a military outcome, but that will be insufficient to eliminate the base conditions that gave rise to the Taliban. The development and Afghan governance parts of the White House plan need quick articulation and implementation. The government knows how many troops will go, where they will go and what they will do. It has not laid out a similar plan for the civilian side.

There are several things which must be done. The training of an Afghan national army and police are primary. The army is performing well in coordination with outside forces. The police

are doing less well. In both cases, basic literacy is a problem which must be dealt with if Afghanistan is to have a modern security structure. It is unthinkable that many of the military in Afghanistan are illiterate. How can they be expected to read manuals, keep instructions or even basic accounts?

Along with a modern military, Afghanistan needs an economic structure that can support it. The current planning is for combine army and police forces of 220,000 individuals. Afghanistan's economy simply cannot support that, so either other nations help Afghanistan to build a viable economy that can support itself, including the military, solve the security problem, or expect that someone else will pay for its military indefinitely. Afghanistan has the potential to become a self-sustaining country, with oil and gas deposits, minerals, transport gemstones and agriculture. China is investing 3.5 billion dollars in the huge Aynak copper field, and will build Afghanistan's first railroad to connect China through Tajikistan and Afghanistan to Pakistan to exploit the holdings, for a profit. Pipelines to bring oil and gas from Afghanistan's Western neighbors, including Iran to Pakistan and India could also generate income for Afghanistan. A road network that connected Central Asia with the sea through Afghanistan could bring substantial economic benefits for all involved. A truck could go from Tashkent in Uzbekistan to Karachi in 18 hours through a stable Afghanistan, whereas now that truck must travel a week across Central Asia and Russia to arrive at a port. The road connection that India and Iran are building from the Iranian port of Charbahar to the Afghan ring road is another avenue for transport, and may even be used to bring in military material for the war in Afghanistan. It should be noted that the new agreements made with central Asian countries and Russia to transport materiel to Afghanistan will come with a high price tag and will not replace access through Pakistan.

Afghanistan used to feed itself, it can do so again. The Soviets destroyed the orchards, vineyards and centuries old underground canal system that were the backbone of Afghan agriculture. The rise in opium production is one response. In almost every part of Afghanistan, farmers have said they would prefer to grow a different crop. In order to do this they need price supports, alternative crops and a multi-year program to make the transition. As it is, more provinces each year are free of opium production, with the overwhelming majority of producers now in Helmand province, where the Taliban are most prevalent. The production pays for the Taliban war effort and places producers in a confrontational relationship with the government. The money is made mainly not by the farmers, but by the traffickers and transporters. It is they who must be targeted first, and one of the most visible failures of the Kabul government is its inability and/or unwillingness to move on this with regard to government officials and, allegedly, relatives of President Karzai.

For the world, the problem of Afghanistan stretches beyond the borders of that country. The proximate reason for the intervention by the United Nations in Afghanistan was, as you know, the hijacking of Afghanistan by an international terrorist organization. That threat still persists. We think of it in parochial terms, in terms of the World Trade center attacks, the attacks in London, Bali, Istanbul, Madrid and so many other places. But the people of the region see it internationally as well, but in more colloquial terms, as a direct threat to their own states. When we look at the maps, we see the dotted lines that denote nation states. For people who live there, and not just the Pushtuns on either side of the Durand Line, those dotted lines barely exist.

Their history reinforces this. Until quite recently, educated people in the area stretching Iran to India were expected to know Persian, which was the language of literature and culture, and for hundreds of years, the language of government in India. Babur, the famous founder of the Mughal dynasty, came from the Fergana Valley in what is now Uzbekistan. Driven out, he conquered Kabul and then Delhi. But it was to Kabul that he returned when he died. As ambassador, I was able to get some funds to help restore his tomb and garden, which overlooks what he thought was the most beautiful view on earth.

The Dari of Afghanistan is an older and, to Iranians, perfectly comprehensible version of Persian, as is the Tajik of Tajikistan. The great cities of central Asian culture, Bokhara and Samarkand, now in Uzbekistan, were and are Persian-speaking. Herat, in western Afghanistan, is considered one of the main wellsprings of Persian civilization and Rumi, the Sufi poet who is so popular in this country, was a war refugee from Balkh in Afghanistan who fled westwards until he came to Konya in Turkey. His Persian Mesnevi is one of the great books of mankind. People in this region share their culture, and their concerns.

Modern demarcations do not tell us the whole story. There are more Tajiks in Afghanistan than in Tajikistan, millions of Uzbeks and Turkmen as well, and an ill-treated minority, the Hazara, whose Oriental looks belie their Mongol origin but whose Shia faith attaches them to Iran. As the Russians pushed outward into Central Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, masses of people fled before them. Many of the residents of northern Afghanistan have close ties across the former Soviet border. When the Taliban were close to the complete takeover of Afghanistan in 2001, I was ambassador in Tajikistan to the north, where we were preparing refugee camps for the expected exodus of Northern Alliance soldiers, mostly Tajiks. Iranians, Russians and Indians were sending them assistance. It is no accident that India has since opened its first military base abroad in Tajikistan. Just as Babur went south to conquer India, there are traces of Indian culture well north into Tajikistan.

Ten years ago, Tajikistan realized that it was turning into another Afghanistan and ended its civil war, with a compromise that gave governmental representation to the Islamic party and brought a measure of stability to that troubled land. Afterwards, Uzbek fundamentalists who had been fighting in Tajikistan were made to leave, and many of them south to join up with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Later they fled to Pakistan where they are active with Al-Qaida. In the fighting in the Bajaur tribal area of Pakistan in 2007, some 150 Uzbek fighters were killed after they tried to impose their harsh Islamic codes. These are the same people. The connections of the area go back much longer and more deeply than we know, and this is an important consideration to bear in mind as we try to deal with our problem in this region.

The specter of Afghanistan has overshadowed all efforts for democratic reform in the countries in the region, who see Afghanistan as an example of what can happen if governments do not severely control their populations. They may not be right, but there is no denying their valid fear of politicized fundamentalists.

Both Russia and China have taken supportive positions to the governments of the region, both individually and through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Since its inception in 2001, this organization has taken an increasingly higher profile in the area, including holding joint

military maneuvers. One of its concerns has been with the nature of the U.S. military presence in the area. Washington needs to develop a multidimensional policy for Central Asia that would include military and economic cooperation, security dialogue and an open explication of what the U.S. intends to do. Lack of clarity feeds the suspicions of governments in the area and reinforces Russian claims that the U.S. intends to bring regime change. In addition, Central Asia will be an increasingly important strategic area in the new century. Vast, under populated, with enormous energy resources and other potential, it could easily be called ‘the New, New World.’ The U.S. needs to know what it wants in the area. As it is, the war in Afghanistan has brought apprehension of both Islamic fundamentalism and the U.S. presence in the region to the Central Asian states and to China and Russia, both of whom regard Central Asia as their sphere of influence. All of these countries, front line states for Islamic fundamentalism, should be included more into solving the problems of Afghanistan.

Mutual recriminations from Pakistan and India that the other is using Afghanistan to its own advantage are correct on both sides. Pakistan has demonstrated that it does not want a strong government in Afghanistan, Afghanistan has refused to accept the Durand line as the border with Pakistan and India has used its relations with Afghanistan to encourage Pakistani nervousness. Even though both Pakistan and India stand to benefit from the economic advantages that trade and energy pipelines could bring to them, they have persisted in using Afghanistan as a playing field in their rivalries. India has clearly won in Afghan popular opinion. Only 8 percent of Afghans view Pakistan favorably, although there is a bilateral trade worth some \$2 billion per year and still several million Afghan refugees living in Pakistan.

The attack on Mumbai is another example of the regional aspect of the problem. The Indian Foreign minister acknowledged that the attack was designed to ruin Indo-Afghan relations and divert Pakistani military forces from the west to the east, but said that he was not sure his government would be able to remain quiet if another such attack took place. Both India and Pakistan accuse the other of using Afghanistan as a surrogate arena for their regional rivalry. No stability in Afghanistan can last while they play this game. Calls have recently been made for an international conference to declare Afghanistan neutral and for its neighbors to forswear interference there. It would be a step in the right direction.

One must add to this increasingly large equation the question of Kashmir. Bin Ladin came to Afghanistan to set up camps to liberate Kashmir, which has been the main problem in relations between India and Pakistan and no final peace in the region can fail to take it into account. The Taliban have now taken over in Swat, and there are reports that they are moving into other areas as well. If they succeed in expanding, they will have control of the whole swath of territories from the FATA, Federally Administered tribal Area through to the border of Gilgit, next to Kashmir. They are already only a hundred miles from Islamabad. Their message is one of societal reform and distributive justice as much as religious conservatism. It is a very serious situation, and accommodation by Islamabad has proven to be a failure.

Iran has also played a role in Afghanistan, both helpful and harmful. In the Bonn process, it played an important role in bringing the parties together and provided help to the military effort as well. It has lost over three thousand police and soldiers fighting drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Iran bitterly resented being added to the “axis of evil” in response. While Iran can and

should, for its own benefit, be helpful in Afghanistan, it has also made clear that it could cause trouble for allied and specifically U.S. troops in Afghanistan whenever it wished. People of the region know that a Persian sword is one which can cut both ways.

Internally, Afghanistan is challenged by lack of governance, drug production, regional rivalries and the sheer enormity of the physical and psychological problems that will not go away because Western donors are tired. Externally, it is threatened by interfering neighbors and a global threat. For Afghanistan to cease to be a platform for international terrorists, the military threat to it must be removed, and care must be taken to ensure that Afghanistan does not fall into the same situation that led to the Taliban takeover. This means developing governance, political institutions and a self-supporting economy.

The challenge is now greater than it was in 2001. President Obama has made this his priority foreign affairs issue, as it should be. He has picked excellent people to work on the problem, in the persons of Ambassador Holbrooke and Ambassador Eikenberry. But the problem is very difficult and getting worse. Many Americans want to find a way out of a situation in which they didn't want to be in the first place. When I left Tajikistan in July 2001, I told Washington that we did not have as choice about whether to fight Islamic fundamentalism, but only a possible choice about where we would fight it. That is just as true today. We cannot walk away.

The people in the grease-covered shops on the Kabul airport road, and millions like them across Afghanistan, are ultimately the guarantee of the stability of Afghanistan and of preventing it from becoming a platform for terrorism. They are still there in their shops. We must enable them to act, to paint signs, to do business, and to be free.