

Afghanistan: At the Crossroads

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Located on an ancient highway of trade and conquest, at the crossroads of civilizations, Afghanistan, rugged and remote, has withstood many invasions and undergone numerous internal changes over the centuries. Today it sits at the crossroads of history. Physically, politically and culturally, it remains a perplexing mix of modernity and the past.

Governed by its own rules and codes, deeply averse to order imposed either by an outsider or a central authority from within, it has always been a uniquely unforgiving No-Man's-Land. The population, predominately rural, has always preferred an agrarian social structure consisting of tribal codes and historical relationships underpinned by Islam to modern forms of governance and administration. Urban centers maintain social, religious and trade networks, but government authority rarely extends beyond the city gates.

Force is usually the main engine of power, but popular support is essential for the long term. Such support demands culturally and religiously specific forms of justice and security that are sometimes at odds with modern versions. Contemporary structures and values all too often fall victim to perpetual infighting, religious and tribal reactionaryism, and various forms of subversive involvement from regional actors. Today, the American-led project in Afghanistan faces the same problems.

Afghanistan has suffered from instability and brutal conflict for three decades. Most signs of modern development and infrastructure, so evident by the 1970s, have been destroyed and left in ruins or at best half-started. No doubt modern sentiments and values are present, especially in the urban areas, and connections to a larger regional and worldwide community are fairly common. But this takes place in the midst of a cultural landscape that originated a thousand years ago, and has changed little beyond the outskirts of Kabul. One could say that thirty years of war has dragged this country back to an era more akin to the medieval period; for most rural areas, perhaps a period it never really left.

Most Afghans cringe at the possibility of the Taliban retaking power in the country. But the Taliban have been very effective at reasserting different forms of influence in the rural areas of Afghanistan, hampering reconstruction efforts and deterring local cooperation with the Afghan government and/or Western entities. Previously stable areas in the west and north of the country are now becoming increasingly dangerous as the Taliban presence grows. Support and good will for both the Afghan government and Western forces have diminished and the Taliban have re-stepped into the vacuum. Supported by several regional interests and displaying a vigorous, effective information campaign, they exert increasing influence throughout the country by utilizing various modes of intimidation,

** Editor's Note: Mr. Cohn is currently deployed in Afghanistan. The opinions and views expressed by him in this article are his own and do not represent Glevum Associates in any way.*

co-optation, along with a sophisticated mixture of incentives and cultural bargaining that is finely calibrated down to the village level.

Few signs of improvement are apparent. Massive embezzlement and fraud have squandered millions in aid and left little improvement in the everyday lives of many Afghans. Afghan security forces remain alarmingly untrained, uncommitted and unreliable. Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police salaries remain uncompetitive, there are few mechanisms to protect recruits from Taliban violence and intimidation, and rampant corruption and lawless brutality have further deterred many Afghans from seeing the benefits of joining or even cooperating with Afghan security forces, particularly with the ANP. Corruption and bribery plague the Afghan institutional structure, from the lowliest district police recruit, to judges, provincial council members, parliamentarians, and even government ministers. Even Hamid Karzai himself is culpable. Former warlords and criminals hold government posts, and the entire system runs on patronage. Karzai surely had good intentions when he first began in 2001-2003, but the job would not be easy for any man, and in order to garner a level of local control, he has felt forced to make innumerable unsavory compromises—more than he can make good on.

A good number of Afghans are now frustrated. An Afghan always remembers what he is promised, and as many promises continue to go unfulfilled, hopes disappointed, and trust broken, many have become alienated from the goals of the government and Western forces. The Taliban version of security and justice, while never well-received, has re-emerged as a viable alternative in comparison. This understandable disenchantment can be manifested as apathy, non-cooperation, or active anti-government activity. The fate of Afghanistan hangs in the balance of these reactions.

The Taliban are not a singular entity and not the only enemy we are fighting here. Nor are we simply waging a war against Pashtun nationalists, religious fanatics, and Arab jihadists supported by foreign interests in the region. There are many who join the conflict as a way to make a living or to avenge a real or perceived wrong committed by Afghan or Western forces. Additionally, tribal, ethnic, and regional rivalries and feuds continue to persist and complicate the situation. Currently, the Western troop presence and the inept Afghan government serve to unite this otherwise disparate group.

Questions of honor and disputes of an economic and political nature have meant that private vendettas and more generalized conflict have been endemic features of Afghan life for centuries. Grievances over unresolved land disputes or unsatisfactory judicial rulings regarding stolen property or murder often fester animosity between tribes or villages. Vendettas, both individual and collective, have been known to last for generations. Creative ways to resolve these disputes and assuage these historical and cultural attitudes that instigate unrest need to be devised. A focused strategy providing sufficient incentives and a nuanced, practical, level-headed, but politically and culturally sensitive approach to reconciliation, calibrated to a local and individualized level could still draw upwards of 60 percent of current extremist elements back into the political process.¹

¹ David Kilcullen. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

The likely trajectory of future developments seems unpredictable at the moment. For now, speculation on the implications of Afghanistan's first peaceful, constitutional transfer of power is a moot point, although final election results will not be out for another few weeks. By most accounts, it seems Hamid Karzai will have his mandate for another term, despite the reports of low voter-turnout and allegations of significant fraud and rigging. There is little doubt election manipulations did occur, but aside from avoiding a run-off election, Karzai was likely to win regardless. The low turnout is felt hardest in the south, where Karzai, although significantly not as popular as he was eight years ago, would have likely garnered the necessary 50 percent to legitimately avoid the run-off. The fraudulent votes cast, regardless of how blatant or crass, would have probably been legitimately cast anywhere else if security had not been a concern.

As it stands, about a third of Karzai's total votes are questionable, seriously threatening his current 54.6 percent if a recount were to occur. If a second election were to take place, it must be held before the end of October, when entire provinces get closed down by winter snows. This would leave a two-week window for a run-off. If a run-off is called too late to hold in the fall, several scenarios could play out. Some people involved in the process have hinted at either an interim government or some-sort of power-sharing deal. There is the possibility the country could be left without an official government for months.

Another problem is that the accusations of fraud further reinforce the negative perception of the Afghan government as corrupt, further undermining the legitimacy a re-election was intended to reassert, and further complicating the US and international community mission here. The United States has done a great deal to distance itself from the entire election process from the beginning, not wanting to publicly endorse any candidate or appear to be meddling in any way. After these accusations however, the United States may feel the need to further distance itself from Karzai in order to not appear to the Afghan people as an enabler to such corruption. In many ways this is a wise policy for the United States, but it is at odds with our overall goals of establishing a credible and effective government apparatus in Afghanistan that is accepted by the people and can act as a strong and stable ally of the West.

The fraud simply was not necessary. Karzai would have won even more handily in a run-off, which would have excluded the 38+ additional candidates, and a run-off would have lent more legitimacy to the vote. Karzai should have realized it was clearly in his interests to have allowed a run-off to take place. Now regardless of the outcome, the resulting reinforcement of negative attitudes and perceptions is very likely to lead to more disenchanted and alienated Afghans, increasing the potential proliferation of anti-government and anti-western violence. The country is not at the point of a popular uprising—for the most part, many Afghans are tired of war—but large scale protests in the streets of Kabul and elsewhere are not unthinkable in the coming weeks and months.

The overall situation becomes even more complicated when we consider Afghanistan's neighbors. While from the west, the Iranians are probably the most active neighbor operating within the boundaries of Afghanistan, it is Pakistan from the east that

poses the greatest threat to stability. Pakistan's chief involvement in Afghanistan is and has always been concerned with India. Their support to the Taliban, the tribes settled astride the border, al-Qaeda elements, and other Islamic extremists has been a decades-long policy of supporting and harboring radical religious agitation and insurrection in Afghanistan, as they have done in Kashmir, designed primarily to counter Indian influence.

This policy of fostering radical coups in neighboring countries has now backfired, threatening the viability of the nuclear-armed Pakistani state itself. While the Pakistani government and military have recently increased efforts to break up the networks on the border, and the civilian population has lost a great deal of sympathy for the extremists, as they have also become their targets, it seems Pakistan remains so far unwilling or unable to completely walk away from this policy. Some of the population has turned or mobilized against the extremists, but, despite what they may claim, the Pakistani government and military are still not doing everything within their capacity to crush these networks, which continue to operate and influence events on both sides of the border. Significant portions of the Taliban leadership continue to plan and reorganize from bases in Quetta and Peshawar.

Despite being the recipient of the largest amount of US aid in the world, the Pakistanis have seen little advantage in US success in Afghanistan. The Taliban have been their main proxy here for over a decade. At present, they likely calculate the United States will not remain in Afghanistan for more than ten more years, at most. Pakistan may no longer see the United States as a long-term ally, and India has invested very heavily in Afghanistan in recent years. It is therefore possible the Pakistanis still believe they can continue to maintain this suicidal juggling act long enough to outlast the US resolve in the region, thereby maintaining a presence and influence in Afghanistan to counter India. At the same time, the Pakistanis may see some benefit in hitching their wagon to China, whose interests are increasingly at odds with India's and the United States' as well.

The United States must be prepared to make hard decisions towards Pakistan. The perpetual double-game must be stopped, once and for all. The rampant rise in radicalism and anti-Americanism must be curbed and reversed. Civil government and moderate politics must be promoted. The country must be stabilized. As a regional problem, it will also require regional cooperation and constant micro and macro level engagement led by persistent and forward-thinking strategies and multilateral diplomacy, in addition to targeted air strikes and cross-border raids. The entire region, not just Afghanistan and Pakistan, cannot continue much longer with more of the same. Iran, the northern border countries, China and India all have important stakes in the game and a role to play. Russia and several Arab interlocutors can also positively influence and mediate. While diplomatic arrangements have developed and improved amongst these countries in recent months, the various tribal, religious, ethnic and international tensions and rivalries remain ultimately no closer to resolution. Forging cooperative and mutually beneficial interdependence on the ground, and not just on paper, is essential.

In Afghanistan, the United States has to demonstrate real progress with security, governance, and reconstruction soon. In order to retake the momentum in this conflict, recapture the hearts and minds of the Afghan people, and move towards a semblance of

success, we need to maintain the initiative. The assignment of newly arrived General Stanley McChrystal, his subsequent re-tooling of overall strategy, and the continuing phased troop surge has likely been designed to do this. For the moment however, any revitalized enthusiasm amongst the Afghan people in response to the recent changes and refocus has greatly subsided since June.

McChrystal's new 'people-centric' strategy focuses on increased local engagement. Achieving this requires enhancing appreciation and understanding of the Afghan psyche and their social networks, cultivating more personal relationships, developing specific individual and collective arrangements addressing particular needs that produce real, positive results throughout the country, and calibrating our efforts and messages down to the village level. Ordinary Afghans need to see and believe things will change for the better, not remain stagnant or get worse.

Everything depends on security. We will have to better protect the Afghan people, not just in the cities but throughout the countryside as well. Military counterinsurgency operations and targeted strikes, mindful to avoid civilian casualties, should continue. Enhanced training and development of an effective Afghan security force must be accomplished soon. We also will have to better engage, entrust, and protect networks of tribal elders willing to organize against the Taliban on both sides of the Durand Line and throughout the rest of Afghanistan. The Taliban have recently decapitated several attempts of multiple communities mobilizing forces against them. But despite these constant threats, reprisals, and other forms of intimidation, there are still communities willing to resist. We need to empower and protect them so they can.

More troops are likely needed to do all this, and it seems additional reinforcements will arrive soon. Unfortunately, many past invaders have thought similarly and suffered for their decision. At the height of its involvement here, Soviet forces numbered several hundred thousand before withdrawing. The coalition presence barely meets a third of that, even with the proposed surge. But despite a growing pessimism, it is yet unclear if the American led project in Afghanistan will fare any different than its predecessors. The current goals are defined, lessons continue to be learned, and the way ahead is fairly straightforward. We will likely know within the year whether the reinvigorated attention has arrived too late to make a difference.

In the end, one has to wonder if Afghanistan will ever stabilize and modernize. Long-term stability requires a centralized monopoly of force extending throughout the country and an effective government capable of monopolizing the vision of the future and unifying the population—something Afghanistan has rarely experienced. Despite the best efforts, resources, training and attention of the West, we cannot completely control the prospects for success. The Afghan government must address its widespread incompetence and corruption and deliver as advertised. The Afghan people must participate in their own security and prosperity as well. Afghanistan could play a pivotal role in regional trade. At the moment it risks dependency on foreign aid for the foreseeable future.

For the time being, the situation still demands the West's resolve, surely risking more if we were to withdraw anytime soon. A window of opportunity still exists to achieve some lasting positive results for both Afghanistan and US interests in the region, but it is rapidly closing and has been for some time. Resting on the precipice of the future and the past, Afghanistan currently lies in a liminal state between stability and instability, between potential and failure. It stands at the crossroads of civilization, political being, cultural identity, and time. The prospects for the region and the world depend on the way ahead in the coming months.