Afghanistan
Long-term Solutions and Perilous Shortcuts

BY ALI AHMAD JALALI

This summer, a series of interconnected events is expected to strongly influence the political and security landscape of Afghanistan, with potentially fateful consequences. In May, some 1,600 delegates (women among them), including government and elected officials, tribal elders, religious personalities, community leaders, and civil society activists met in Kabul to advise the government on basic terms for negotiation with the armed opposition and ways to accommodate reconcilable insurgents. This was to be followed in July by an international conference in Kabul called for by the London Conference in January.[1] The Kabul meeting was attended by foreign ministers from neighboring countries and by Afghanistan's leading partners. The delegates made commitments to improve governance, security, and development in Afghanistan under Afghan leadership.[2] Meanwhile, the U.S.-led coalition launched a major military effort to enhance security and facilitate effective governance in Kandahar, the second largest Afghan city and the spiritual home of the Taliban.

All these events came against a backdrop of several years of poorly resourced and ill-coordinated reconstruction efforts leading to continued insecurity and violence, which have peaked this year to the highest level since the removal of the Taliban from power in 2001. Now the public mood in Afghanistan is a combination of anxiety and hope. While people suffer daily from insecurity

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and violence, a feeling of suspense and nervousness persists. Hopes for the future are seriously blunted by fears that the U.S. exit strategy may lead to a military drawdown before the Afghan government becomes capable of facing the threats. On the other hand, Afghans across the country hope that a new U.S. approach, coupled with a military and civilian surge, might reverse the security decline and pave the way for stabilizing the situation.

A recent public opinion survey by ABC News, the BBC, and ARD German TV found that after a steep decline in recent years, there has been a 30-point spike in the percentage of those who believe that the country is headed in the right direction; 70 percent now say it is, the most since 2005. The number of Afghans who believe their own lives will be better a year from now has jumped by 20 points to 71 percent, a new high.[3]

Missed Opportunities and New Approaches

The current situation in Afghanistan is an inevitable result of previous domestic and international responses to the country's political and security challenges. The Taliban were removed from power but not defeated. The issues of the group's internal ability to reconstitute itself and to regain its external support were not addressed. The co-option of notorious human rights violators after the Taliban's defeat perpetuated their malign influence in the long term, while achieving only short-term tactical gains in stabilizing the country. Additionally, insurgents, criminal networks, freebooters, and domestic and foreign opportunists filled the vacuum created by the inadequate deployment of international troops and the slow development of Afghan state institutions.

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Afghanistan's enormous challenges cannot now be solved purely through Western arms and money, especially if delivered in an uncoordinated and haphazard manner. The local, regional, and global dimensions of the conflict are inextricably intertwined and require an integrated strategy and international partnership. The absence of a shared vision for Afghanistan has blurred the distinction between means and ends. Too often, means have defined goals, tactics have driven strategy, supply has determined demand, and short-term necessities have taken precedence over long-term priorities. This failed vision has led many to question whether the U.S.-led operation is aimed at securing Afghanistan, reshaping the whole of South Asia, or simply setting the conditions for a responsible exit plan.

However, as the experiences of the past 9 years indicate, unifying the efforts and coordinating the actions of stakeholders with uneven capacities and divergent political concerns in a highly volatile and dynamic environment has so far proven elusive. The key to future success is a shared vision for the endstate in Afghanistan, and the building of indigenous capacity to achieve this goal.

The new U.S. policy for Afghanistan and Pakistan aims at disrupting, dismantling, and defeating al Qaeda in both countries and preventing its return.[4] Building a viable government in Afghanistan that can control its territory and win the trust of its people is the

U.S. Army (Russell Gilchrest)

Afghan National Police officers at their graduation in Logar Province

prerequisite for achieving these goals. The eradication of violence and terrorism cannot presage establishment of a stable government, but rather a stable government must presage the eradication of violence and terrorism if these gains are to be sustained. Although Afghanistan cannot be turned into a full-fledged democracy overnight, it can eventually be transformed into a stable country defined by democratic principles. The fulfillment of such a potentiality will require the governments of Afghanistan, the United States, and coalition partners to forge a shared vision of an Afghan state able to govern its citizens justly, grow its economy steadily, and secure its territory independently. During the last 8 years, policies designed to stabilize and democratize Afghanistan have failed not because of their infeasibility, but because of the uncoordinated and poorly resourced efforts to support them. International involvement in the state-building process was an afterthought to the fight against global terrorism and was driven by the desire to remove the threat to the United States emanating from Afghan territory. From the outset, contradictory concepts dominated international efforts to stabilize the country.

Practicable democracy is a prerequisite for America's successful involvement in Afghanistan and its political future. This requires a long-term commitment. It is an intricate process, and it is not cheap. A long-term state-building process, however, can be hindered by short-term political agendas, as well as by excessive dependence on external assistance. In 2003–2004, the rush to a quick solution for integrating the incompetent, and often corrupt, demobilized militiamen by dumping police structures on them undermined the long-term development of the National Police, who continue to suffer from rampant corruption and professional incompetence.

At the January 2010 London Conference, the international community reaffirmed its support for building indigenous capacity to enhance security, stability, and prosperity in Afghanistan. This commitment was a recognition that the growing violence in Afghanistan and the concomitant instability in Pakistan have serious consequences for the region and beyond. As Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Admiral Michael Mullen stated in testimony before a U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, "The outcome of today's conflicts will shape the global security environment for decades to come."[5]

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It is thus quite understandable that the London Conference dwelled on the Afghanization of stability operations, the reconciliation of insurgents, and the development of governance capacity. These efforts are necessary to facilitate the handover of security responsibilities from foreign to Afghan forces. However, the success of such a strategy depends on resources, sound Afghan leadership, coordinated international partnership, and, most importantly, time.

While the next 12 to 18 months are critical for reversing the insurgents' momentum and consolidating security gains, it is not expected that Afghanistan will become capable of facing the threats without major commitment of international forces extending another 5 to 10 years. The military operation earlier this year in Helmand Province and the pending military effort in Kandahar should serve as a microcosm and test of the new approach of creating space for building good governance, rule of law, development, and Afghan-led security. It is expected that over time, such services will undermine the appeal of the Taliban among the population and lure them away from the insurgents.

Tackling the insurgency in Afghanistan requires two sets of mutually reinforcing measures. It is necessary to, first, reduce the threat level and, second, to build and mobilize effective Afghan leadership capacities and Afghan ownership of stabilization and development efforts. The main obstacles to achieving these are ineffective and corrupt governance, difficulties in expanding the quantity and quality of Afghan security forces, and the diverging strategic interests of Afghanistan's neighbors.

Reintegration and Reconciliation

As is often stated, reducing the threat level requires separating the committed insurgents from the rest of the population. The true test of the London Conference approach will come when troops move from "clearing" insurgents to "holding" territory and "building" security. To be effective, the enlarged International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) deployments in Afghanistan must provide security for the population not principally by fighting the Taliban, but instead by preventing the Taliban from coercing or communicating with the population.

To achieve this, there must be a reconciliation and reintegration of less ideologically zealous fighters, and a regional cooperation plan that limits the foreign support for insurgents. Providing a way for individuals to rejoin a law-abiding society will be at least as important as any military operations to kill or capture opponents of the government. As thousands of U.S. and Afghan forces head

to southern Afghanistan, the operation must aim at confronting Taliban influence in the area. But one of the most difficult parts of the mission will be tackling the corrupt power structure in Kandahar, where a strong, personality-driven political order is emerging that undermines building sustainable state institutions and the rule of law.[6]

The key to stabilization is curbing the ability and desire of insurgents and spoilers to continue the violence, while simultaneously creating a national capacity to transform war-torn structures into peace-building institutions. This process involves constructing a credible legal and political system, reestablishing public confidence in state institutions, and shifting from a culture of violent opposition to one of peaceful competition for power and influence.

Despite the stated commitment of the Afghan government to national reconciliation with the Taliban and other insurgents, the process so far has been devoid of strategic vision, clearly defined parameters, and unity of effort. Rhetoric has been more prominent than substance. There has been no clarity about whom to talk to, what political cost is acceptable to achieve peace, and what kind of endstate is envisioned. Attempts by different Afghan and foreign actors to engage the insurgents have lacked transparency and have been fragmented, uncoordinated, transient, and often counterproductive.

The potential for a grand peace deal is limited by the competing interests of domestic, regional, and international actors vested in Afghanistan. Local deals may be achievable but can only be initiated in an environment conducive to fruitful negotiations. There must be incentives for the opposition to talk in hopes of gaining what cannot be achieved through violence. Currently, such conditions exist only in some localized areas. The reconciliation process should be pursued only where the relative dominance of the government makes negotiation worthwhile.

While there is a need for pursuing a reconciliation process, it cannot succeed unless a favorable regional environment is created. This requires integrating the peace process into a unified counterinsurgency strategy among all stakeholders. Building a sustainable peace requires joint efforts by Afghanistan and Pakistan, supported by the international community, to tackle extremism both militarily and ideologically.

As President Hamid Karzai stated after the London Conference:

> *A successful reconciliation program must have two main components: Reintegration and reconciliation. The reintegration is for the thousands of Taliban soldiers and village boys in our country who have been driven out of their homes—either by fair means or by intimidation, by bad behavior on the part of NATO* [North Atlantic Treaty Organization] *forces or by bad behavior from Afghan forces—and who do not stand ideologically against the Afghan people or the international community. They must be persuaded by all means to return. . . . Then there is the political structure of the Taliban, which has its own environment of relations with the rest of the world and the question of al-Qaida and the terrorist networks. Our neighbors and the international community will be involved in this. That's going to take a lot more effort.*[7]

However, while there is wide support for the reintegration of the Taliban rank and file into Afghan society, there is little consensus

among different actors regarding reconciliation with the leadership of the Taliban. The Afghan government and Pakistan see peace talks with those leaders as a key to peace, while the United States doubts that negotiation with them from a currently weak position in Kabul will help.[8] Washington favors reintegration of low-ranking Taliban members into Afghan society, but does not favor political reconciliation with its leaders.[9] It is expected that the impact of the U.S. military surge in Afghanistan in the next 18 months and the planned expansion of indigenous security capacity and governance next year will create a favorable environment for meaningful negotiation with the insurgents' leadership.

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Regional Cooperation

Afghanistan's neighbors and other regional powers can be obstacles, or they can be solutions to the country's problems. Progress requires stability in Afghanistan to be seen as an extension of other nations' strategic priorities. Openness and cooperation with regional powers offer the best prospects for security and economic progress. However, no regional approach can be fully effective without the influence of major outside powers (NATO, China, India, Russia, and the United States) that are involved in the area.

Four points are of key importance. First, regional interference and intervention in Afghanistan will continue as long as the country remains unstable. Second, Afghanistan's capacity to overcome its political and economic problems is unavoidably linked to the strength of its regional relationships. Third, Afghanistan's bilateral relationships with Iran and Pakistan are closely influenced by their attitudes toward the United States and India's involvement in the region. Whether these neighbors cooperate or create obstacles for Afghanistan's recovery is greatly influenced by American strategic policies in the area, Iran's problems with the United States, and Pakistan's disputes with India. Finally, the perception that U.S. interest in Afghanistan and the region is fading drives domestic opposition forces and regional views of the Karzai regime.

Building Indigenous Capacity

Simultaneously with reducing overall insecurity through a regional approach, efforts must be expanded on a second set of measures aimed at building Afghan capacity to govern. Organizing indigenous capacity for efficient, effective service delivery and economic development is the only viable long-term strategy to ensure stability. However, constructing a nearly 172,000-strong Afghan National Army (ANA) and 134,000-strong Afghan National Police (ANP) by October 2011 is an overly ambitious and unrealistic program. The obstacles include recruitment, illiteracy of recruits, poor professional leadership, a low-quality officer corps, desertion, drug addiction, competing factional and ethnic loyalties, corruption, retention, and long-term sustainability. According to a recent report by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, only 25 percent of the ANA and 12 percent of the ANP are capable of operating independently.[10] Given the relatively low rate of retention and high rate of desertion, the ANA and ANP will need 5 to 10 years to become viable institutions serving

When government provides basic security, citizens have confidence in rule of law and economic growth

U.S. Army (Matthew Freire)

the people rather than individual powerbrokers. In the meantime, there is a tendency to create and support stopgap security/logistics entities including private security companies and local militias. Unless these groups are strictly controlled and gradually phased out as ANA and ANP expand, such

shortcut security measures can add to lawlessness and seriously undermine long-term security and governance priorities.

The immediate focus must be on training the ANP to a high enough standard of professionalism and discipline that they are able to defend themselves against insurgent attacks and protect the population. The inadequate training of police forces, and the resultant high casualty rates they sustain in battle, contributes to a poor retention rate of officers in a force that will need to expand significantly in size and capability in order to meet its challenges.

Meanwhile, the situation dictates that soldiers must learn how to be police, and police must learn how to fight like soldiers. Traditional police functions relating to upholding justice and the rule of law cannot be effectively performed amid severe insecurity. Until conducive conditions emerge, police will inevitably function primarily as a security, rather than an investigative, force. Police work should be understood as fulfilling two key aspects of the counterinsurgency plan. A paramilitary police force (or gendarmerie) must be assigned to do the "holding" of cleared areas and other heavy-duty police work. This must be balanced with purely civilian police work to uphold the rule of law and protect the population against crime. The concept of upholding the rule of law has been too frequently ignored in Afghanistan—by politicians and military strategists alike.

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The notions of government legitimacy and the rule of law are particularly important when considering calls for enlisting cooperation of local communities in fighting insurgency and facilitating local security. Traditionally, local communities have complemented efforts by Afghan governments to enhance security. However, such collaboration has been possible only when the communities believed in the political and structural legitimacy of the central government, its viability, and its sustained capacity to deliver services.

In many areas, this social compact has been transformed during years of war and displacement. Traditional leaders and tribal structures have been sidelined, replaced by parties with guns, money, and links to extremist and criminal networks. In such an environment, arming purported tribes to face the insurgency cannot work as it did in Iraq. Attempts in the recent past to arm communities led to the emergence of unregulated militias. In the absence of full government control, these militias not only sharpened ethnic frictions but also got involved in criminal activities, terrorized populations, and undermined the very rule of law they were supposed to protect.

Governance

Afghanistan's transition from conflict to peace demands the creation of a set of institutions, capacities, resources, and provisions for the rule of law. Success will be defined by the government's ability to control territory, win the trust of the people, and prevent infiltration and subversion from abroad.

However, more than nearly a year after the presidential elections, the government had yet to form a full cabinet, and ongoing tension between the executive and legislative branches undermines its effectiveness. Civil society is dangerously excluded from major policy decisions. Significant portions of the country have

a limited or nonexistent government presence, so some areas are completely controlled and governed by the Taliban or local powerbrokers. The government's reputation for bribery and inefficiency has led many Afghans and members of the international community to simply bypass it.

In his speech in London, President Karzai stressed the importance of reforming state institutions and fighting corruption. He stated, "Our approach to good governance is expanding the reach of the central government to the remotest parts of the country as well as building up systems of governance at the village level. We expect the international community to support us in these vital endeavors."[11] All these are good words, but unless the institutional legitimacy and effectiveness of the government are established, it will be hard to mobilize traditional institutions in the interest of good governance.

To stabilize Afghanistan, the capacity of Afghan society must be mobilized to achieve what the people aspire to, and not what is imposed on them through supply-driven assistance. There is a debate whether the change can come through a centralized government from the top or through a local approach from the bottom. It is not one or the other, but both. The process at Bonn started with a tacit bottom-up approach, allowing regional strongmen and warlords to seize power in the provinces and operate independently. To counter this excessive decentralization, the constitution adopted in 2004 introduced a strong centralized government that failed to respond to local requirements. There is a need to fine-tune the balance of power between the center and the peripheries. The basic unit of reconstruction is the "district," and this should be reflected in power and budgetary responsibility.

The commitments made in the Kabul Conference should further democratic accountability, equality, human rights, gender equality, good governance, and economic growth. It is quite clear that business as usual will not help. There must be changes in the conduct of the Afghan government and both the type and level of support offered by the international community.

Conclusion

For the Afghan people, and thus for the government and its international supporters, the current security situation is untenable. Renewed international attention offers a vital opportunity to reverse the course of the conflict. Failure to address the inadequacies of the government in the areas of justice provision, welfare, public service delivery, institutional transparency, probity, and, most importantly, security will soon fundamentally undermine the legitimacy of state authority.

Practicable democracy is a prerequisite for America's successful involvement in Afghanistan and the country's political future. This requires a long-term commitment. It is an intricate process, and it is not cheap. A long-term state-building process, however, can be hindered by short-term political agendas, perilous shortcuts, and militarization of development.

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Unless the Afghan people are given substantial and sustained reasons for supporting government institutions, they will

understandably not be prepared to risk the violent reprisals of insurgents. However, if the government and its partners can provide basic security and minimal development impetus, the Taliban will become irrelevant and marginalized. Their ideology and governance are not popular, but through intimidation, coercion, bribery, and propaganda, they are currently able to fill the vacuum of authority that exists in much of the country. Optimistic but pragmatic, and fed up with rhetoric and empty promises, Afghans need change they can believe in. PRISM

Notes

[1] The text of London Conference Final Statement, January 28, 2010, available at <www.voltairenet.org/article163783.html>.

[2] "Foreign Ministers to Attend Kabul Conference: NATO's Envoy," *Xinhua*, May 19, 2010.

[3] ABC News/BBC/ARD Poll, "Afghanistan—Where Things Stand," available at <http://abcnews.go.com/PollingUnit/abc-newsbbcard-afghanistan-poll-note-methodology/story?id=9512487>.

[4] Transcript of speech by President Barack Obama on Afghanistan, December 2, 2009, available at <www.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/12/01/obama.afghanistan.speech.transcript/index.html>.

[5] Ibid.

[6] See Carl Forsberg, *Politics and Power in Kandahar*, Afghanistan Report 5 (Washington, DC: Institute of the Study of War, April 2010), 6–7.

[7] Interview with Hamid Karzai, "There Has to Be Peace Now," *Der Spiegel*, January 31, 2010, available at <www.spiegel.de/international/world/0,1518,675140,00.html>.

[8] "No Reconciliation with Taliban Leadership," UPI, January 19, 2010, available at <www.upi.com/Top_News/US/2010/01/19/No-reconciliation-with-Taliban-leadership/UPI-57561263878504/>.

[9] "US-Afghanistan at Odds over Reconciliation and Reintegration," Voice of America, May 4, 2010, available at <http://www1.voanews.com/english/news/asia/US-Afghanistan-at-Odds-Over-Reconciliation-and-Reintegration-83571572.html>.

[10] Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, *Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, January 2010, 63–68

[11] Office of the Afghanistan President, Statement by His Excellency Hamid Karzai, President of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, at the London International Conference on Afghanistan, January 28, 2010, available at <www.president.gov.af/>.