

Transitioning Afghanistan in the Post-Withdrawal Era: Setting the Stage for a Stable Political Order

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Abstract : *Within the coming year, the American led-NATO mission will begin withdrawing troops from Afghanistan. Though the decrease in troop levels in the short-term has been expected, the final date wherein all American and NATO troops leave the country is still a matter of heated debate, primarily for two reasons: the inconclusive steadiness of the present Afghan regime and the uncertainty of what a post-withdrawal Afghanistan would like. With this in mind, this article intends to explore both the logic of NATO intervention and the subsequent occupation of that war-torn country. It examines the primary reasons why stability and progress within Afghanistan have been elusive, the current debate amongst policy makers regarding the steps ahead, and finally proposing an alternative model that proposes a new US and NATO regional strategy that places the burden on Afghanistan stability and reconstruction on neighbors who share the larger NATO goal of a self-sufficient and stable Afghan government. Accordingly, the most potentially successful NATO approach towards Afghan stability would adopt the proven economic, social, political, infrastructural, and local governance models of regional states, and honing and adopting those models into the broader Afghan domestic theatre. For this to happen, a new plan of cooperation from both NATO and American policy makers with regional states and their respective civil societies needs to be constructed and implemented.*

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Introduction

While the US-led NATO effort in Afghanistan is certainly not the Alliance's first mission, the sheer amount of financial resources and manpower that NATO has allocated to that war-torn country constitutes the Afghan mission as being NATO's "most significant operational commitment to date".¹ And though the devastating impact of 9/11 reminded the global community of the phenomenon of international terrorism, including the concept of mega-terrorism, the dilemma of the weak state gradually unearthed the overall process of how state failure can act as a safe haven for terrorist organizations for training and logistics, only to be eventually exported abroad.² Thus, unlike past NATO interventions, whose primary purpose was to alleviate or solve an intrastate or regional dilemma (i.e. Bosnia, Kosovo, counter piracy missions off the Horn of Africa), the intervention in Afghanistan can be seen as truly international in nature and character, as terrorism theoretically can affect all the composite participants within the NATO mission and beyond. It is this daunting reality that renders the success or failure of NATO's Afghan mission to be decisive for the future of the Alliance in the 21st century.

However, since 2001, when the UN mandate established the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and particularly after the destruction of the ruling echelon of the Taliban leadership in Kabul, the war in Afghanistan has slowly moved into stagnation and ultimately a regression. As the Afghan occupation approaches a decade, it is now necessary to take stock in how NATO arrived at this point and what lies ahead. This analysis, hence, examines the logic of NATO intervention, the subsequent occupation of Afghanistan, and the possible endgame. As such, the primary reasons why stability and progress have not been attained within that country will be discussed, while factoring in the current debate amongst policy makers regarding the steps ahead, and finally proposing an alternative paradigm for the US-led NATO mission in order to achieve some level of sustainable stability. In doing so, this article proposes a new US/NATO regional strategy that places the burden on Afghanistan stability and reconstruction on neighbors who share the larger NATO goal of a self-sufficient and stable Afghan government. It is argued that the most potentially successful NATO approach towards Afghan stability would adopt the proven economic, social, political, infrastructural, and local governance models of regional states, and honing and adopting those models into the broader Afghan domestic theatre. For this to happen necessitates the simultaneous understanding of the strategic miscalculations that has led to the current Afghan impasse while constructing and implementing a new plan of cooperation from both NATO and American policy makers with regional states and their respective civil societies.

Strategic Misdiagnosis of Afghanistan's Dilemma

Two factors regarding the present occupation of Afghanistan lies at the heart of American failed attempts to bring order and stability to the war-torn country, and subsequently, engineer an orderly and dignified withdrawal. The convergence and fruition of these factors, namely the initial misdiagnoses of the impoverished nation's real condition and the ideological barriers that obviated the US from pursuing the only workable solution, which was the regional approach to Afghan re-stabilization, has caused strategic paralysis to the NATO mission, incapable of withdrawing out of fear of Afghan regime disintegration, yet not able to fully create a steady, self-functioning government. To understand the logic of NATO intervention, and the strategic and tactical model for "victory" that the US-led Alliance had mapped out for Afghanistan, it is incumbent to first appreciate the Western diagnosis of Afghanistan's dilemma.

On the eve of the US-led invasion, the conventional wisdom amongst Western policy officials was that the country had transformed into Al-Qaeda's main logistical hub by a marriage between the highest echelons of the then obscure terrorist organization with the political regime that was purportedly controlling the country.³ This surface level cooperation convinced large segments of the US policy community that the ideology and actions of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban were somehow in complementary unison. If the Taliban is defeated, so the narrative claimed, Al-Qaeda's power base within the country would dissipate, and having installed a new regime, the Afghan dilemma would be well on its way to being solved. Nevertheless, beneath the veneer of this simplistic rationale, the internal dynamics of Afghanistan was far more enigmatic and contradictory.

As it is now evident, the Afghan predicament was never the Taliban or the fact that Al-Qaeda successfully utilized the territory for operational management. It was not even the expansive opium trade, which partly fueled the survival of the former two entities. These were just symptoms of a larger pathology – that being the absence of an Afghan state. Though even in its most stable incarnation in the 1960s and 70s, Afghanistan was never categorized as anything more than a developing country, it still possessed a semi-functioning, semi-centralized political apparatus, as Mohammad Qayoumi has visually shown.⁴ However, the collapse of its monarchy at the end of the 1970s, the Soviet invasion and subsequent intervention of regional states, only to be exacerbated by the territory becoming the final battleground of the US-Soviet Cold War, caused the dissipation of any vestige of the Afghan state. The Taliban never fully controlled the country, but through its brief tenure, gained and lost command of territory from other rival political entities. Accordingly, the absence of an entity capable of integrating all of Afghan territory under central rule allowed the geopolitical bacteria of Al-Qaeda to enter the country unimpeded, paralyze the host, and gain safe haven – a phenomenon that they have repeated in states such as Somalia, Sudan, and most recently Yemen.⁵

Hence, the solution to the Afghan predicament was not so much the use of force to collapse the assumed ruling regime, but more so the resurrection of the Afghan “leviathan”. Therefore, nation building, from the onset, should have been the American/NATO goal – not the destruction of a certain political entity, but more so the construction of another. Subsequently, the NATO effort is failing not because of defeats on the battlefield or the inability of American hard power to win decisively in combat, but because of the incoherency of the occupation.

Ideology over Pragmatism: The Costs

From this misdiagnosis, a surprisingly under-resourced and inefficient policy was set for the Afghan War, a plan that has largely remained the same, despite periodic modifications, such as the recent troop escalation.⁶ In crude calculations, the initial war-planning required far more troop levels than originally implemented by the NATO mission, not only to provide security for the occupied territory (i.e. fighting insurgents and policing), but more so, to assist with the reconstruction endeavor and outreach to local leaders. In analyzing key military operations in the last century, including sampling the largest of American municipal police forces, John J. McGrath argues that while customary military standards stipulate a “minimum of 20 troops to 1000 inhabitants as the necessary ratio” for successful contingency operations, the “figure of about 13.26 troops per 1000 inhabitants provides a more historically based guideline”, although subject to demographic density, geography, urban/rural settings, and other factors.⁷ Moreover, McGrath was keen to note that this historically based figure also includes indigenous police, military, and private contractors.⁸ Therefore, taking Afghanistan’s population of roughly 28.4 million (according to the latest CIA estimate), the troop density requirements should have been 376,584, according to McGrath’s formulation, and 568,000, according to the putative standard of 20 troops to 1000 inhabitants ratio.⁹ Yet, at no point within the current occupation of that country has NATO troop numbers neared even the lowest estimate. And, while the NATO mission has had success in training a new generation of the Afghan security forces, the uninterrupted and recently escalating violence in that country suggests that the rise in indigenous security personnel has not been matched in quality, and thus clearly not translating on the ground.¹⁰

Furthermore, in the aftermath of the invasion, once NATO forces controlled the territory, a rapid, Manhattan project-like development of the country’s infrastructure should have been one of the primary goals. Now obviously these were staggering aims, albeit, prudent American and NATO statecraft could have engineered a reality where the majority of those funds and manpower came from non-American and most likely, non-NATO sources, particularly from Iran, China, Russia, and India, with possibly far more participation and a leading role given to Turkey (although it is a NATO member).

It has now long been forgotten, but in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the US not only garnered tremendous amount of global sympathy, but more strikingly, unprecedented commiseration from traditional adversaries, some being Afghanistan’s neighbors, and remarkably all loathing the Taliban for a variety of reasons. This newfangled, yet short-lived effort at regional cooperation was on display in the Bonn Agreement, which formalized the transitioning of Afghan regime and reaped substantial amount of aid for the initial phase of Afghan reconstruction. However, the Bush administration, for purely ideological reasons, did not choose to seriously continue engagement with countries such as Iran and Russia, and in the case of India, made contradictory moves which undermined a workable partnership. In placing Iran into a strategically jumbled “axis of evil” with Iraq and the North Korea, and expanding NATO membership and the US military apparatus in post-Soviet Central Asia, essentially encircling Russia, any hope of meaningful cooperation from Moscow and Tehran in the Afghan theatre quickly subsided. All of this was happening while American attention shifted to the crisis with Iraq, draining allotted resources for Afghanistan. Moreover, Washington’s overt support for Pakistan’s then military dictator, Pervez Musharraf, and his connections to the country’s notoriously schizophrenic intelligence agency, rendered a working relationship with India simply undoable. And while the brutalized Afghan polity initially looked upon the US invasion of their country as benevolent intercession rather than imperial conquest, as the years have passed, the reality of the occupation has taken a life force of its own. The shortcomings of the post-Taliban leadership, chiefly, the tremendous amount of corruption, paralyzing bureaucratic inefficiency, along with society’s longing for stability, has sapped the goodwill of the average Afghan.¹¹ Though the NATO mission has brought with it some positive aspects for Afghan society, primarily in communications and banking, almost ten years into the occupation, severe challenges remain for the basic functionality of the Afghan state and society, particularly as only 15%-20% of the population have access to electricity.¹² Thus, as the date for withdrawal comes ever closer and having yet to attain the ingredients for tangible and sustainable economic and political progression on the ground, which in turn, would lessen the potency of the insurgency’s arguments for resistance, which feeds upon popular resentment, the NATO mission is now at an impasse.¹³

The Current American Policy Debate

In recognizing the lack of concrete success, various ideas about the war effort have recently been put forth, ranging from tweaking the status quo strategy, to more far-fetched proposals that would produce more damage than positive results. Starting from the latter, Robert Blackwill, the former U.S. ambassador to India, has called for a de facto partition of Afghanistan, where the US would accommodate marginal Taliban control of the South (i.e. the Pashtu Belt), while splitting it from the rest of the country.¹⁴ In another prescription, Ali Alfoneh and Ahmad Majidiyar from

the American Enterprise Institute have advocated the US to step up its soft power in combating what they deem as nefarious elements within Afghanistan (i.e. Iran and others), making the case that a flaw in US soft-power component is adding to the decline in US influence within the country.¹⁵ Richard Haas and Stephen Biddle from the Council on Foreign Relations have argued for the restructuring of Afghan domestic politics towards a decentralized model, ideally involving stronger local leadership, possible overtures to the more pragmatic Taliban, with the gradual scaling back of American military involvement on the ground.¹⁶ Furthermore, most recently, the Afghan Study Group, in probably the most ambitious policy recommendation to date, has published a report that advocates a 5-pronged approach to Afghan stabilization: internal power-sharing and political inclusion amongst domestic players, downsizing military operations in the South (in hopes of dramatically reducing the American military footprint altogether), domestic security enhancement (i.e. targeting Al Qaeda), fostering internal economic development, and engaging regional and global stakeholders.¹⁷ And as Max Boot has advocated, which also comprises the official US military thinking of late, the Obama/Petraeus strategy of escalated counterinsurgency warfare essentially rests upon a rehashed tactic from the Iraq surge playbook.¹⁸

Though hypothetically attractive, most of these prescriptions are far more emblematic of the lack of a reasoned solution to Afghan stabilization than they are evidences of workable alternatives. Starting from the most unsound, Ambassador Blackwell's approach would not only be vehemently resisted by virtually all Afghans, but more so by all neighboring states, as resulting internecine violence from partition would invariably flood in refugees into bordering countries. Furthermore, a partition will mostly likely lead to an inexorable challenge on Pakistan's territorial integrity, a perfect storm scenario that would be a nightmare for South Asia as a whole and for US/NATO interests. Regarding the Alfoneh/Majidiyar appeal for more US soft power, American funded propaganda outlets and public diplomacy ventures will not bring about domestic bureaucratic efficiency and legitimacy, which is what Afghans really need to stabilize their country. The Biddle/Hass recommendation of decentralization, while far more sensible, is not sufficient and far too speculative. For it to succeed, there needs to exist substantial security and infrastructure development for the local municipalities, the pivotal actors in any proposed decentralized state, to properly function – which invariably goes back to money and manpower. In other words, the decentralization proposal necessitates a prerequisite that simply is not on the ground. This dynamic is even more profound when it comes to the Afghan Study Group's recommendations. Theoretically, all are perfectly valid and appropriate, yet simply not feasible under the current socio-economic conditions of Afghan society. On the domestic front, like the Biddle/Hass proposal, the infrastructure on the ground is incapable of *simultaneously* providing the conducive conditions for internal political power-sharing, domestic security, and the vague forms of endemic economic development mentioned by the Group. Ironically, this is being proposed while the Group has advocated a lessening of US troops in Afghanistan, which in the short term

would exacerbate the security situation, ultimately counterproductive to their goals. Moreover, while their recommendation for engagement with regional and global stakeholders is absolutely correct, they fail to differentiate the diverse interests that bordering, periphery, and major global actors have concerning their preferences in Afghanistan as whole, which remains one of the principle reasons why countries like Saudi Arabia, and to a lesser extent Pakistan, have not consequentially aided the American effort, as their interests within the war-torn state emphatically differ from the US mission. And finally, as Christopher Layne has aptly critiqued, official US policy of utilizing the Iraq surge template is predicated upon the “myth” that the Iraqi surge was successful, when in reality, “the surge was incidental to dampening down the violence”, as the finality to the confessional civil war between Sunnis and Shi'as was the primary cause of the decrease of violence, with the dissipation of Sunni political power.¹⁹

The Way Ahead: A Regional Solution

Nearing a decade of occupation, the American led NATO mission is at a crossroads. In realizing the true nature and cost of the country's re-stabilization, how does a financially strapped and strategically belated US military, with weary NATO partners, turn the war effort around when it is not willing to commit the funds nor the manpower to do so? And, seeing that a disorderly and chaotic withdrawal would most probably engender the return of a reinvigorated Taliban in parts of Afghanistan, with the potential catastrophic affects upon an increasingly unstable, nuclear-armed Pakistan, the US military does not have the option of simply going home. Additionally, the debate for withdrawal or troop escalation hardly takes into account the damaging consequences of Afghan regime disintegration upon the credibility of US sponsored global imperatives and solutions. Hence, a fundamental reconfiguration of NATO strategic thinking is warranted, bereft of any ideological component that would obviate building partnerships that would assist the Alliance to get closer to the stated goal of a fully functioning Afghan state in control over all of its territory, with increasing efficiency and legitimacy. To do this, a regional approach with *like-minded neighbors* of Afghanistan (i.e. bordering/regional countries that broadly favor NATO's goal of a completely functioning Afghan state), is not only the most logical and pragmatic plan, but also the only strategy that provided the most concrete form of success, namely the Bonn Agreement, which formed the nucleus of Afghanistan's first post-Taliban government. Although this not a new suggestion, it has never been implemented and further complicated by the incompatibility of US bilateral policies within the region and that of the larger NATO goal. The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies and the Hollings Center for International Dialogue in their Executive Summary on developments in Afghanistan, held in Istanbul in 2008, stated the following:

Future efforts by the United States and NATO to build stability in Afghanistan should be addressed in a regional context. Giving all the states in the region common and mutually beneficial economic ties will pay large security and political dividends that the current bilateral agreements alone cannot provide.²⁰

To do so, the NATO mission needs to summon all levels of its multi-lateral statecraft in order to bring together the war-torn country's neighbors to provide the raw materials, manpower, and economic and political governance models, in addition to harnessing the influence that regional states possess over their domestic allies within Afghanistan. As both Table 2 and Figure 1 illustrate, in both security and reconstruction, there is virtually no presence of regional neighbors, with the exception of the small role allotted to Turkey. As in 2001, Afghanistan's immediate neighbors, principally Iran, China, Russia, and India, and those on the periphery, of which the most significant is Turkey, have vast discrepancies regarding regional dynamics, and all have differing relations with the United States. Yet, a common concern, which deeply affects their vital strategic interests, binds them together with that of America's stated goal of Afghan stabilization, namely, the fear that if the current Afghan regime falls and the state descends into chaos, virtually all will be adversely affected – regardless of what transpires afterwards. Thus, they have much reason for long-term cooperation. Moreover, because the American occupation of that country has also led to additional tensions between some of them and the US, cooperation on Afghan stabilization, construction, and regional integration would be the most practical and timely method to engineer an American exit of the South Asia.

Barring certain adjustments, a realistic approach to Afghan stabilization would be the synthesis and simultaneous implementation of the following:

Security: Integrating Iranian Security Forces into Afghan Policy & Assisting Iranian/Turkish Efforts at Counter Drug Trafficking

On security, Iran possesses an untapped reservoir of assistance that the NATO mission has never examined to exploit. Tehran not only possesses vast ethnic and religious ties to its Eastern neighbor (i.e. it understands the Afghan languages and culture much better than the NATO states); yet, more importantly, has accomplished tangible security gains in the Western Provinces of Herat, Farah, and Nimruz. Not only are these provinces some of the more safer places within the country but, it is where Iranian investment in security (i.e. training Afghan security counterparts) and infrastructure have poured in, particularly as the local electricity needs of Western Afghanistan are mainly provided by power grids in Iran.²¹ Moreover, the Iranians do not bear the baggage of suspicion that Russia or Saudi Arabia carry amongst the Afghan people, in light of the latter's modern experience with the aforementioned states.

Had the US-Iran relationship improved since the initial invasion, American/NATO policy makers could have applied Iran's successful and localized dual security/infrastructure model, with the logical conclusion of outsourcing major portions of Afghan security to the Iranians, of which the most significant would be assistance in training of the Afghan National Army and security personnel. In this, US policy could have utilized Iranian power for the advancement of the broader NATO goal, while also reducing the cost to blood and treasure. Yet, as the Bush administration chose to forcefully deteriorate relations with Iran under a Reformist government, the domestic reaction in Tehran was the rise of the Iranian New Right, and a fundamental altering of the nescient compromising regional policy pursued by the administration of Mohammad Khatami. Thus, given the current relationship between Washington and Tehran, it can be only expected that Iran's Afghan policy would stay localized to Afghanistan's West, which is where vital Iranian strategic interests lie, and no further. Moreover, given the recent tattered history of Iran-US relations and the high degree of mistrust between the two, short-term, tactical undermining of NATO within the country by Iran is only natural. What is more, despite the purported 'open hand' of the Obama administration to Iran, the real tragedy of the contemporary interaction between both states has been the subsuming of all aspects of this relationship for the sole sake of Iran's nuclear program. This simplification of this complex relationship gratuitously sacrifices the major points of agreement within the strategic panorama of both states. Yet, if this relationship can improve in the future, major aspects of cooperation within the Afghan theatre will become much more likely.²²

Besides training of Afghan security personnel, a critical issue is the role of Afghanistan in the supply of opium within the region and to Europe. According to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, the two main transit routes of Afghan opium are the 'Balkan route', which crosses Iran into Turkey, and into Europe, and the 'northern route', which traverses through Central Asia and into Russia.²³ As Iranian and Turkish security forces have a well established pattern in combating regional drug trafficking,²⁴ the US-led NATO mission within Afghanistan can capitalize upon this effort by integrating the Turko-Iranian effort with NATO strategy as a whole. A partnership with both the Iranian and Turkish security forces, in collaboration with the US military, can significantly stem the tide of this substantial problem, which poses a national security and societal threat to virtually every country.

The National Infrastructure Development Model from Three Large Developing Economies: Utilizing the Russian "Reset" and Reaching out to China and India

Since the Obama administration took office, it has fostered pragmatic approaches to Russia and China. On Russia, the fruits of its endeavors can be seen in disparate places such as the lessening of tension in Eastern Europe by the US desertion of

the proposed missile defense system, the signing of the New START Treaty, new and enhanced civil society exchanges, nonproliferation, and energy efficiency efforts.²⁵ With China, the Obama administration's cooperative efforts had notable success in stemming the precipitous repercussions of the 2008 global financial crisis. Washington could continue this pragmatism to the Afghan theatre. In doing so, it can enlist vital assistance from these countries in hopes of rebuilding substantial portions of the Afghan national infrastructure. While during the Bush years, efforts cooperation on Afghanistan were problematic, today the strategic reality is ripe for a helpful Russian, Chinese, or Indian role in rebuilding and training a new generation of Afghan engineers and technicians. Not only do these countries have proven track records at successful handling of large-scale projects, such as inter-provincial highways, dams, and airports, (mainly due to their own recent experiences of modernization), but more so, infrastructure development will provide immeasurable assistance to the efficiency of the current and future Afghan regimes, and also, in the short-mid term, will provide thousands of jobs which will help to undermine and eventually break away recruits for the insurgency.²⁶ Furthermore, as these states fear another scenario where Afghanistan falls into a failed-state paralysis, the possibility that Islamic fundamentalist insurgent groups would utilize the territory for logistics and training may very well prove to be a domestic concern for them, specifically in light of the fact that all three suffer from widespread insurgent movements that, at times, rhetorically have espoused Islamist political activism.²⁷

Public Services: Education and Health via the Rural Iranian Experience

Surely if the American south can obtain assistance from Iran's successful model of health clinics in rural poor communities, Afghanistan should be no different.²⁸ Lack of progress in the extremely vital area of public services, specifically as it relates to public health and education, is a direct result of ideological constraints upon American/NATO policy makers that have obviated finding and implementing pragmatic solutions. One of the chief areas of complaint from Afghan society at large in the post-Taliban occupation has been the incapability of their leadership and the NATO mission to improve their quality of life. As access to health care and education are the foundations on which a successful Afghan stabilization rests, it is of utmost concern for American policy makers to reach out to education and public health counterparts in Iran, and probably Pakistan and India for successful models. The joint American-Iranian clinic experience in the rural American South, predicated on the Iranian model of traveling local-based community "health houses" aimed a preventative care, is an ideal template for Afghanistan. Furthermore, a lessening of tension with Iran can bring in Iranian civil society's help with donating school supplies and low-tech infrastructure development for Afghanistan's primary and secondary school system, particularly as Persian is one of the national languages of both countries. Success at the public service level will go a long way to impeach

the insurgency's arguments of a colonizing, occupying NATO coalition within their homeland.

Expanding Efficient and Culturally Relevant Micro-Financing: Avoiding the Pitfalls of other Developing States

Bringing in Afghanistan's battered small businesses, local bazaar, and farming communities into the regional and global political economy was one of the initial aims after the fall of Kabul in 2001. The backbone of any stable country is the inclusion of its middle class and subsequently, their concerns and broader vision for their business interests locally and later, internationally, will provide democratic pressures upon any government. While being diminutive in size, there still exists a wealth generating strata of society within Afghanistan – primarily in traditional arts and crafts, non-opium agriculture, and other forms of manual labor. After the fall of the Taliban, the challenge was daunting: most of the country's infrastructure was destroyed by three decades of war, an absent banking sector, an economy mostly dependant upon the export of opium, and virtually no local expertise or ability to provide nescient microfinance services. Since then, the Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA), started in 2003, has made valiant strides, with concrete and positive results. In 2007, their initial impact study found the following:

Microfinance loans are, on average, larger than informal loans and unlike informal loans have been used largely for productive purposes: just under 89 percent for the first loan rising to 100 percent in the fourth loan cycle. Though loans are taken for a number of activities, the important ones are livestock, small business, self-employment and housing. In all, 81 percent of loans have been used to either start a new business or expand an existing business. The expansions and start-ups have employed people and it is estimated that every client generates 1.5 employment opportunities. This figure, extrapolated to all MISFA clients, would add up to 500,000 jobs.²⁹

While the activities of the MISFA should be fostered, it is important to utilize the arduous lessons of other developing societies that do not appear in short-term micro-lending feedbacks. Fiona Leach and Shashikala Sitaram's study of Indian caste women working in the silk-reeling industry is a case in point. In developing economies, the financial empowerment of the lower strata of society is not the only hurdle to overcome. In theory, by providing loans to poor laborers, the hope is that this injection of funds could transform them into successful independent entrepreneurs. Yet, as Leach and Sitaram discovered, several unknown factors come to the fore and can largely undermine the intended goal:³⁰

- The recipients “inexperience and limited understanding of the marketplace (especially of the relationship between the price paid for the raw material and the profit secured on the end product).”
- The recipients limited “understanding of finance, and especially of the nature of credit.”
- “The volatility and seasonality” of the recipients manufacturing opportunity. In Leach and Sitaram’s case, it was the silk reeling, yet this applies to other traditional local economies, particularly in Afghanistan.
- The possibility of an “ineffective support system” from the lending institution, whether bank or NGO.
- “Poor literacy” and accounting skills of recipients.
- The “variable quality” of the product, possibly resulting in fluctuation and often lowering of prices.
- The possibility of the recipients’ business model and project not being “based on genuine business principles and a sound assessment of the market”, but often being influenced by local customs, that at times is adverse to growth.

Moreover, as Khandakar Qudrat-I Elahi has noted, in developing countries such as India and Bangladesh, religious traditions can become a complicating factor in the supposed financial empowerment of woman entrepreneurs, as societal restrictions are often disregarded by lending institutions and NGOs when entering into a microfinance agreement.³¹ What this suggests is that the experiences of countries such as India and Bangladesh with microfinance, both the positive and negative, need to be implemented and honed to fit a similar dynamic within Afghanistan. Thus, the inclusion of Indian, Bangladeshi, and Pakistani civil society, as it relates to the overall Afghan experience with microfinance, is of immense importance and value for the future of the Afghan economy and other aspects of development. Another possible way to work around these contradictions is the fusion of Islamic finance with microfinance, which would address the usury issues in Islamic societies that are typically ignored by well meaning NGOs or lending institutions. Furthermore, the cultural factor in traditional patriarchal societies that have deeply rooted hierarchical norms on the societal acceptable behavior of men and women in the workplace must also be taken into consideration by lending partners. Thus, the outlook once loans are rendered should go beyond building a feasible business model that purportedly renders positive growth towards repaying the initial loan and expanding activities, but more so to acclimate the cultural sensitivities of Afghanistan so that both societal norms can be respected and that fiscal growth can be achieved. Leach and Sitaram’s case study serves as a caution for the long-term.

Ultimately, it is vital to understand that for the next generation, the capacity of the Afghan government to sustainably grow will depend upon its interaction and

integration with regional countries, whether it be in its ability to export aspects of its traditional economy and its non-opium agriculture. Thus, the experience of countries such as India, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, should be adapted for the nescient Afghan economy. In the long-term, the changing shape of the Middle Eastern and South/Central Asian economics as a whole would most likely become the dominant factor within Afghan society and governance as whole. Avoiding the pitfalls of past NGO and lending practices in India or Bangladesh, while taking the positive attributes from those experiences will contribute to the re-grafting of the Afghan economy into the broader South Asian and Middle Eastern economies.

Environment: The Need for NATO Ingenuity

The ravages of the Soviet and American occupations, with the horrors of civil war in the interim, has caused immeasurable harm upon the environment of Afghanistan. Within the earth, land mines, shrapnel, industrial pollution from the Soviet and American military, and other residues of war have only been compounded by the years of soil degradation and compaction, decreasing of organic matter, loss of soil structure, salinization, and the poor internal drainage that exists in many third-world countries. In 2003, the United Nations Environment Programme unambiguously linked environmental degradation with social instability, and job creation:

“...the combined pressures of warfare, civil disorder, lack of governance and drought have taken a major toll on Afghanistan’s natural and human resources. These impacts have exacerbated a more general and long-standing process of land degradation, evidence of which is apparent throughout much of the country. As the country’s natural resource base has declined, its vulnerability to natural disasters and food shortages has increased. Clearly, effective natural resource management and rehabilitation must be a national priority if Afghanistan is to achieve long-term social stability and prosperity. Mitigation of environmental problems and protection of the environment will also support sustainable rural development and enhance job creation.”³²

By far, the most beneficial contribution that NATO countries could provide Afghanistan is attempts at environmental restoration, which is a pillar of sustainable development. If cooperation between NATO and regional states can be reached in the aforementioned sectors concerning Afghan stabilization, NATO countries, whose technological prowess concerning environmental technology is at the forefront, can devote much needed effort into the Afghan environment. Subsequently, irrigation

and modern methods of farming will invariably contribute immensely to the growth of a new-fangled working class within the country, broadening Afghanistan's agricultural base for internal consumption and eventually export.

Contradictions within the Saudi Arabian and Pakistani Roles

It is also worth noting that while the only major precondition for countries that would be integrated in a future Afghan regional stabilization approach would be that they share the broad vision of an efficient and stable regime in power, it also important to understand the difficulty of including states that generally do not or cannot share this goal. Ironically, it is two staunch regional American governments that have diametrically opposed Afghan policies with that of the US/NATO goal, each emanating from a strategic vulnerability that either respective government seeks to address. For strategic reasons, Saudi Arabia and Pakistan benefited from having Afghanistan under partial Taliban control. The Saudis saw the Taliban as a pressure tool against Iran and the Pakistanis envisaged them as an asset against their long-time Indian nemesis. This explains why they were amongst only a handful of countries to have recognized the Taliban movement as the legitimate representation of Afghanistan and provided diminutive and tentative tangible help to the United States during the war effort and subsequent occupation, despite the economic (i.e. Pakistan) and diplomatic/military (Saudi Arabia) support they have received from Washington.

While Saudi Arabia's influence within South Asia is not trivial, it's primarily reducible to providing financial assistance for cohorts with the same disposition. In the event that the House of Saud chooses to play a role that is commensurate with the stated American mission, it would need to fundamentally shift its preferences regarding Afghanistan with those of the larger NATO goal. As for the contradictory relationship with Pakistan, Islamabad's role is by far more consequential. Thus far, the dualistic tension of authority and legitimacy that exists between Pakistan's civilian and military leadership, has not allowed it to provide tangible positive benefit for Afghan re-stabilization. It is without doubt that Pakistan has tremendous and multilayered influence within Afghanistan. However, the greatest benefit that Pakistan can provide the region is to reassert its authority over the entirety of its territory, particularly Islamabad's role in providing basic public services to its population, a task that successive governments have been found wanton. While this endeavor is by no means a small task, if the embattled Pakistani civilian leadership can construct a mechanism where the current dual nature of authority gives way to a process where the brunt of authority rests within the civilian leadership, as in the Turkish example, then the state will not only have enhanced efficiency in internal governance, but a far more responsible regional policy, which will aid in Afghan stabilization in the long-term.

Conclusion

Regardless of how one defines the stated intentions of the NATO mission within Afghanistan – good, malign, strategic, or tactical – the almost decade long endeavor within that country is at best an imbroglio. The simple reason for this has been the categorization of NATO actions as either “winning” or “losing”, when in reality it should have been “to build” or “not to build”. With the impending withdrawal of NATO forces, if the goal now is to resurrect a functioning Afghan government, in order to realize a dignified withdrawal, than the regional approach to stabilization is the only workable, pragmatic choice that the US-led NATO mission has. Only with this approach, which utilizes the individual capabilities of each respective regional state for the advancement of the stated NATO goal, can Afghan regime stabilization, with greater efficiency and legitimacy, be realized.

APPENDIX

Table 1: International Security Assistance Force (Troop Distribution)

NATO		Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) nations		Non-NATO and non-EAPC nations	
Albania	250	Armenia	40	Australia	1550
Belgium	530	Austria	3	Republic of Korea	245
Bulgaria	610	Azerbaijan	95	Malaysia	30
Canada	2905	Bosnia & Herzegovina	45	Mongolia	60
Croatia	290	Finland	165	New Zealand	235
Czech Republic	470	Macedonia	165	Singapore	50
Denmark	750	Georgia	925	Tonga	55
Estonia	160	Ireland	7	United Arab Emirates	35
France	4000	Montenegro	35		
Germany	4920	Sweden	500		
Greece	135	Ukraine	20	Aggregate Troop Amount: 131,983	
Hungary	520				
Iceland	5				
Italy	3770				
Latvia	135				
Lithuania	180				
Luxembourg	9				
Netherlands	195				
Norway	415				
Poland	2490				
Portugal	115				
Romania	1695				
Slovakia	300				
Slovenia	80				
Spain	1470				
Turkey	1825				
United Kingdom	9500				
United States	90000				

Source: <http://www.isaf.nato.int/> (Continuously updated)

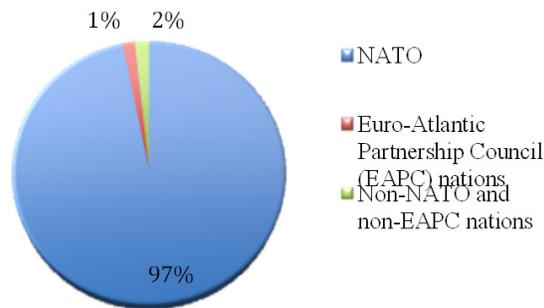


Table 2: Provincial Reconstruction Teams

City	Province/Command
<i>U.S.-Lead (all under ISAF banner)</i>	
1. Gardez	Paktia Province (RC-East, E)
2. Ghazni	Ghazni (RC-E). with Poland.
3. Jalalabad	Nangarhar (RC-E)
4. Khost	Khost (RC-E)
5. Qalat	Zabol (RC-South, S). with Romania.
6. Asadabad	Kunar (RC-E)
7. Sharana	Paktika (RC-E). with Poland.
8. Mehtarlam	Laghman (RC-E)
9. Jabal o-Saraj	Panjshir Province (RC-E), State Department lead
10. Qala Gush	Nuristan (RC-E)
11. Farah	Farah (RC-SW)
<i>Partner Lead (most under ISAF banner)</i>	
<i>PRT Location Province Lead Force/Other Forces</i>	
12. Qandahar	Qandahar (RC-S) Canada (seat of RC-S)
13. Lashkar Gah	Helmand (RC-S) Britain with Denmark and Estonia
14. Tarin Kowt	Uruzgan (RC-S) Australia (and U.S.) (Replaced Netherlands in August 2010)
15. Herat	Herat (RC-W) Italy (seat of RC-W)
16. Qalah-ye Now	Badghis (RC-W) Spain
17. Mazar-e-Sharif	Balkh (RC-N) Sweden
18. Konduz	Konduz (RC-N) Germany (seat of RC-N)
19. Faizabad	Badakhshan (RC-N) Germany. with Denmark, Czech Rep.
20. Meymaneh	Faryab (RC-N) Norway. with Sweden.
21. Chaghcharan	Ghowr (RC-W) Lithuania. with Denmark, U.S., Iceland
22. Pol-e-Khomri	Baghlan (RC-N) Hungary
23. Bamiyan	Bamiyan (RC-E) New Zealand (not NATO/ISAF).
24. Maidan Shahr	Wardak (RC-C) Turkey
25. Pul-i-Alam	Lowgar (RC-E) Czech Republic
26. Shebergan	Jowzjan (RC-N) Turkey
27. Charikar	Parwan (RC-E) South Korea (Bagram, in Parwan Province, is the base of RC-E)

Source: Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," RL30588, Congressional Research Service (Washington D.C. , 2011), 84

Table 3: Afghanistan Social and Economic Statistics

<i>Population</i>	Ethnicities	28 million +. Kabul population is 3 million, up from 500,000 in Taliban era. Pashtun 42%; Tajik 27%; Uzbek 9%; Hazara 9%; Aimak 4%; Turkmen 3%; Baluch 2%.
	Religions	Sunni (Hanafi school) 80%; Shiite (Hazaras, Qizilbash, and Isma'ilis) 19%; other 1% Christians-estimated 500-8,000 persons; Sikh and Hindu-3,000 persons; Bahai's-400, Jews-1 person; Buddhist- small numbers, mostly foreigners. No Christian or Jewish schools. One church.
Literacy Rate		28% of population over 15 years of age. 43% of males; 12.6% of females.
Total and Per Capita GDP/ Growth Rates		\$23.3 billion purchasing power parity. 114th in the world. Per capita: \$800 purchasing power parity. 219th in the world. Growth: 14%, about the same 12% in 2007. Unemployment Rate 40%.
Children in School: Schools Built		5.7 million, of which 35% are girls. Up from 900,000 in school during Taliban era. 8,000 schools built; 140,000 teachers hired since Taliban era. 17 universities, up from 2 in 2002. 75,000 Afghans in universities in Afghanistan; 5,000 when Taliban was in power. 35% of university students in Afghanistan are female.
Afghans With Access to Health Coverage		65% with basic health services access-compared to 8% during Taliban era. Infant mortality down 18% since Taliban to 135 per 1,000 live births. 680 clinics built.
Roads Built		About 2,500 miles paved post-Taliban, including repaving of "Ring Road" (78% complete) that circles the country. Kabul-Qandahar drive reduced to 6 hours.
Judges/Courts		About 1,000 judges trained since fall of Taliban; some removed for corruption
Banks Operating		17, including branches in some rural areas, but still about 90% of the population use hawalas, or informal money transfer services. Zero banks existed during Taliban era. Some limited credit card use. Some Afghan police now paid by cell phone (E-Paisa).

Access to Electricity	15%-20% of the population. Much of its electricity imported from neighboring states
Government Revenues (excl. donor funds)	About \$1.4 billion in 2010; nearly double the \$720 million 2007. Total Afghan budget is about \$4.2 billion, with shortfall covered by foreign donors, including through World Bank-run Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund.
Financial Reserves/Debt	About \$4.4 billion, up from \$180 million in 2002. Includes amounts due Central Bank. \$8 billion bilateral debt, plus \$500 million multilateral. U.S. forgave \$108 million in debt in 2004, and \$1.6 billion forgiven by other creditors in March 2010.
Foreign/Private Investment	About \$500 million to \$1 billion per year. Four Afghan airlines: Ariana (national) plus three privately owned: Safi, Kam, and Pamir.
Mining/ Minerals	Vast untapped minerals affirmed by U.S. experts (June 2010). Chinese firm mining copper in Lowgar Province; December 2010: contracts let to produce oil in Sar-I-Pol Province (north) and for private investors to mine gold in Baghlan Province.
Agriculture / Major Legal Exports	80% of the population is involved in agriculture. Self-sufficiency in wheat production as of May 2009 (first time in 30 years). Products for export include fruits, raisins, melons, pomegranate juice (Anar), nuts, carpets, lapis lazuli gems, marble tile, timber products (Kunar, Nuristan provinces). July 2010 Afghanistan-Pakistan trade agreement may increase these exports.
Oil Proven Reserves	3.6 billion barrels of oil, 36.5 trillion cubic feet of gas. Current oil production negligible, but USAID funding project to revive oil and gas facilities in the north.
World Trade Exports	Exports: \$403 million. Imports: \$3.4 billion (2009). Main imports are food, energy, capital goods, textiles, autos. Top five trading partners (in descending order): Pakistan, Russia, Iran, India, United States.
Cell phones	About 12 million cell phones, up from several hundred used by Taliban government officials.

Source: Kenneth Katzman, "Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," RL30588, Congressional Research Service (Washington D.C. , 2011),4.

NOTES

¹ This is the official description of the Afghan mission according to NATO. For a full list of NATO missions around the world, see: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_52060.htm

² James A. Piazza, “Incubators of Terror: Do Failed and Failing States Promote Transnational Terrorism?” *International Studies Quarterly*, 52 (2008): 469–488.

³ John Rollins, “Al Qaeda and Affiliates: Historical Perspective, Global Presence, and Implications for U.S. Policy,” *CRS Report for Congress*, Congressional Research Service (2011), 8-9.

⁴ Mohammad Qayoumi, “Once Upon a Time in Afghanistan...”, *Foreign Policy*, May 2010, accessed November 15, 2010, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/05/27/once_upon_a_time_in_afghanistan?page=full

⁵ Regarding Yemen, the most recent incarnation of Al-Qaeda in a concerted regional format has been the rise of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). See: Rollins, “Al Qaeda and Affiliates” Congressional Research Service (2011).

⁶ For a debate upon the proposed efficacy of the troop escalation in Afghanistan, See: *New York Times*, “Obama’s Surge Strategy in Afghanistan,” November 30, 2009, accessed December 1, 2010.

<http://roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/11/30/obamas-surge-strategy-in-afghanistan/>

⁷ John J. McGrath, “Boots on the Ground: Troop Density in Contingency Operations”, *Global War on Terrorism Occasional Paper*, 16, Combat Studies Institute Press (2006), 147.

⁸ John J. McGrath, 147.

⁹ In 2010, the CIA estimated that Afghanistan’s population was 28,395,716.

¹⁰ In a statement to the US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, Admiral Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, confirmed an expected escalation in violence in the coming year: “We expect the violence coming in 2011 to be greater than last year.” Moreover, he also made mention of the difficulty in building an efficient local security force within the country: “Despite a dramatic increase in our civilian presence in Afghanistan this past year, improvements in sub-national governance and reconstruction have not kept pace with progress in improving security.” “This has impeded our ability to hold, build and transfer.” See: Phil Stewart and Susan Cornwell, “Afghanistan Violence to Rise in 2011: U.S. military,” *Reuters*, February 16, 2011, accessed March 20, 2011. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/16/us-usa-afghanistan-idUSTRE71F4SI20110216>

¹¹ For better understanding about corruption in Afghanistan, See: Integrity Watch Afghanistan, “Afghan Perceptions and Experiences of Corruption: A National Survey, 2010”, 2010, accessed March 20, 2011. www.iwaweb.org

¹² See Table 3 in APPENDIX.

¹³ In the Afghan national survey conducted by Integrity Watch Afghanistan, more than half of respondents stated that corruption fuels the insurgency. Moreover, 60% of households stated that in land-related disputes, they were forced to turn to non-state actors for conflict resolution, thus signaling a weakening of Afghan state legitimacy. See: Integrity Watch Afghanistan, “Afghan Perceptions and Experiences of Corruption”, 2010, accessed March 20, 2011. www.iwaweb.org.

¹⁴ Robert Blackwill, “A De Facto Partition of Afghanistan” *The Politico*, July 10, 2010, accessed September 15, 2010 <http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0710/39432.html>.

¹⁵ Ali Alfoneh and Ahmad Majidiyar, “Iranian Influence in Afghanistan: Imam Khomeini Relief Committee”, *Middle Eastern Outlook*, American Enterprise Institute (2010).

¹⁶ Richard Hass, “We’re Not Winning. It’s Not Worth It,” *Newsweek*, July 2010, accessed September 1, 2010

<http://www.newsweek.com/2010/07/18/we-re-not-winning-it-s-not-worth-it.html>

& Stephen Biddle, Fotini Christia and J Alexander Thier, “Defining Success in Afghanistan: What Can the United States Accept?”, *Foreign Affairs*, (July/August 2010): 48-60.

¹⁷ The Afghan Study Group, “A New Way Forward: Rethinking U.S. Strategy in Afghanistan”, 2010, accessed March 20, 2011. www.afghanistanstudygroup.com

¹⁸ Max Boot, “Afghanistan: The Case for Optimism”, *Articles* (via Commentary), September 2, 2010, accessed on October 1, 2010. <http://www.cfr.org/publication/22878/afghanistan.html>

¹⁹ Christopher Layne, “Petraeus’ Dubious Strategy in Afghanistan”, *Chicago Tribune*, August 23, 2010, accessed September 20, 2010. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2010-08-23/news/ct-oped-0823-afghanistan-20100823_1_iraq-surge-petraeus-afghanistan

²⁰ The American Institute of Afghanistan Studies and the Hollings Center for International Dialogue, “Afghanistan’s other Neighbors: Iran, Central Asia, and China”, (Istanbul, 2009).

²¹ Ibid, 8.

²² In a testimony before Congress in January of 2007, James Dobbins, the head of the American delegation to the Bonn Conference, stated that Iran “played a positive and essential [role] in forging the compromise upon which the Afghans ultimately agreed”. Thus, future cooperation based upon shared Iranian-US/NATO interests is not out of the question. See: Dobbins, James, “Ending Afghanistan’s Civil War - A Testimony before Congress”, RAND Corporation (30 January 2007).

²³ European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, “Monitoring the Supply of Heroin to Europe”, (Luxembourg, 2010), 4.

²⁴ According to Europol, “Turkey ‘plays a central role’ in the trafficking of heroin to Europe due to its geographical location. Heroin seizures reported by Turkey to the EMCDDA amounted to 10 tonnes in 2006, which represents over half of the total amount seized in Europe (EMCDDA reporting countries: EU Member States, Norway, Croatia and Turkey). Turkey ranked second in the world after Iran for quantities of heroin seized in 2006 (UNODC, 2008) and fourth for quantities of morphine seized worldwide.” See: Ibid, 9.

²⁵ For a useful listing of US-Russian Cooperation, see Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, “U.S.-Russia Relations: ‘Reset’ Fact Sheet”, June 24, 2010, accessed January 11, 2011 <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>

²⁶ For a detailed picture on recent Indian and Chinese infrastructural development, chiefly those in rural settings which can be applicable to the Afghan case, See: M. Julie Kim and Rita Nangia, “Infrastructure Development in India and China – A Comparative Analysis” *Working Paper*, Pacific Basin Research Center, (2008).

²⁷ For a more detailed account on Russia, China, and the ‘Islamic Factor’, See: Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*. (London: Chatham House (the Royal Institute of International Affairs), 2008), 91-114.

²⁸ See: Christina Lamb, “Deep South calls in Iran to cure its health blues,” *The Sunday Times*, December 20, 2009, accessed July 1, 2010. http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/middle_east/article6962844.ece

²⁹ Martin Greeley and Mohit Chaturvedi, *Microfinance in Afghanistan: A baseline and initial impact study for MISFA*, Institute of Development Studies, Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (University of Sussex Brighton, 2007), ix.

³⁰ Fiona Leach and Shashikala Sitaram, “Microfinance and Women’s Empowerment: A Lesson from India,” *Development in Practice*, 12, no. 5 (November 2002): 584-585.

³¹ Khandakar Qudrat-I Elahi, "Microfinance, Empowerment, and Sudra Women in India," *Development in Practice* 13, 5 (November 2003): 570-572.

³² For a more detailed picture of the environmental situation within Afghanistan, see: United Nations Environment Programme, "Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment: Afghanistan" 2003, 6, accessed April 11, 2011.

<http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications/afghanistanpcajanuary2003.pdf>