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## It's the Regime, Stupid

### *The Imperative of State-Building in Afghanistan*

Marin Strmecki

The source of the global terrorist threat lies not only in a shadowy international terrorist network but principally in the support and protection afforded to terrorists by radical regimes. It is only when these regimes are replaced by moderate and civilized states that the threat of international terrorism will begin to abate. Therefore, the issues of nation-building, state-building, and postwar political reconstruction become as important an element of war as the exercise of conventional military power. Nowhere is this proposition more evident than in Afghanistan, the first target in the war against terrorism.

**Military Strategy without a Political Component.** Immediately after 9/11, senior U.S. policymakers gave little thought to dovetailing the United States's military strategy with a political strategy to create a moderate and pro-Western postwar state in Afghanistan. President Bush, impatient to strike back at the United States's enemies, adopted an approach limited to destroying the Taliban regime and the al Qaeda command and support structure in the country.

As a result, senior U.S. policymakers struck a strategic partnership with the Northern Alliance. Along with its support for the Northern Alliance—a coalition of warlords and militant Islamist groups—the United States also recruited other war-

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lords, many of whom had a despotic past, to challenge the Taliban in the south and the east. Other groups, including the moderate Rome Group that was organized around former king Zahir Shah, were largely ignored.

The drawbacks of this short-term strategy of toppling the Taliban and withdrawing without reestablishing order became quickly apparent to many policymakers, especially since U.S. abandonment of Afghanistan in 1992 contributed to the rise of the Taliban. At the same

in the Interim Administration, appointing Hamid Karzai only to the nominal chairmanship. All effective power in Kabul was concentrated in a narrow clique of ethnic Tajiks from the Panjshir Valley led by the defense minister, Mohammed Qassim Fahim. Using its control of the military, police, and intelligence services, this faction threatened and coerced potential political opponents.

Six months later, the Northern Alliance continued its power grab at the

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time, the task of rooting out al Qaeda committed the United States to a significant, continuing counterinsurgency campaign. The partnership with the Northern Alliance created problematic consequences for both state-building and the counterinsurgency campaign.

Despite President Bush's calls for restraint and broad-based processes to create a new government, the Northern Alliance quickly seized Kabul and began establishing rule. Meanwhile, many Northern Alliance commanders and warlords in northern Afghanistan went about exacting ethnic and political revenge. In the siege of Tora-Bora, warlords affiliated with the Northern Alliance allowed hundreds of al Qaeda leaders, including Osama bin Laden, to escape in exchange for bribes.

At the Bonn Conference, U.S. policymakers, still seeking a quick exit, essentially ratified Northern Alliance control of the government by giving its leaders control over all of the "power" ministries

Loya Jirga. When it became clear that Zahir Shah, who was expected to appoint moderate cabinet ministers and wrest control from the militant factions and warlords, would be elected head of state, Fahim and the Northern Alliance threatened to roll out their tanks unless his candidacy was sidelined. Fearful of instability, the United States pressured Zahir Shah into rejecting any future role in government. Fahim then secured fully two-thirds of the cabinet seats for the Northern Alliance, which meant that the Transitional Administration was even more narrowly based than the preceding Interim Administration.

Thus, an irreconcilable tension has emerged in U.S. policy. On one hand, President Bush's rhetoric created a commitment to establishing a moderate, liberal political order. Yet, on the other hand, the United States had brought to power a narrowly based regime dominated by a Northern Alliance faction intent on monopolizing power.

## State-Building in Postwar Afghanistan.

This experience in Afghanistan shows that the United States lacks a framework for thinking about the place of postwar reconstruction in military planning. The rest of this article seeks to outline such a framework, and although it focuses mainly on Afghanistan, it offers broader insights for political-military strategy in general. The framework is organized around three key questions: First, what is a reasonable and realistic political-military U.S. objective? That is to say, what kind of a political regime should the United States seek to establish? Second, who are the potential local political-military allies and how should they be handled *during the war* to achieve long-term, postwar U.S. objectives? Third, how should the United States go about reconstituting the country's political order? Moreover, how should it balance the competing imperatives of maintaining influence over the character of the postwar political order with the need to involve local groups in the political process?

## Defining Objectives in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan, U.S. policy was handicapped from the outset by a poverty of expectations. Policymakers, equipped only with a cursory knowledge of recent Afghan history, appeared to be guided by the belief that a coalition government of warlords and militia leaders supportive of the U.S. effort to rid their country of al Qaeda was the best they could expect. However, a closer examination of Afghanistan's society and history would have revealed that policymakers could have aspired to the higher standard of helping to create a moderate, pro-Western state.

While the popular view of Afghan politics is dominated by images of endless civil conflict, such strife was rare before 1978. In fact, the previous half century was characterized by a high degree of political stability and slow but steady political and economic development. The most stable and progressive period was the 40 years of rule under Zahir Shah, during which Afghanistan adopted one of the most advanced constitutions for a predominantly Muslim developing country. Afghanistan had also developed a substantial technocratic and professional elite, one grounded in modernism but also rooted in Afghanistan's traditional tribal and clan structures. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of Afghans practiced a moderate version of Islam, rejecting radical groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. This era of promising potential was cut short by the palace coup that deposed Zahir Shah in 1973, and completely destroyed by the Communist coup in 1978 and the Soviet invasion in 1979. Subsequently, a war of national liberation engulfed Afghanistan through the 1980s, followed by a vicious cycle of factional strife in the 1990s.

U.S. policymakers should have asked themselves what political formula had produced the moderate and progressive regime of Zahir Shah, and how the United States could adapt that formula to create a moderate, stable state. In this sense, the problem in Afghanistan was not one of nation building. Afghans have existed as a nation for more than 1,000 years, and there was no need to *create* a common sense of identity. Although Afghans also had ethnic identities as Pushtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Turkomen, and so forth, the overwhelming majority of the population also shared a sense of Afghan nationalism. It is revealing that none of Afghanistan's eth-

nic groups sought to secede from the country over the turbulent past quarter century. The challenge in postwar Afghanistan was to use this common sense of national identity as the basis for creating a political system that provided an equitable and continuing role for all groups in the system. The term "moderate and broad-based government" became shorthand in policy circles for such an outcome.

Before the Communist coup, the success of the Afghan state was based on (1) using the support of traditional social structures, such as tribal, clan, or village leaders to legitimize the state, and (2) developing an educated technocratic elite that was connected to these social structures but was also modernist. The important political and social role of traditional social structure to political stability in this period should not be underestimated. This structure commanded the allegiance and channeled the political participation of an overwhelming majority of the Afghan people. In fact, Zahir Shah's principal political role was managing Afghanistan's complex social and political relations, working to ensure that all groups were accorded proper status in the system and that all important figures felt included in a process of consensual governance.

During the past fifty years, the principal challengers to this traditional social structure have been a variety of factions advocating radical political or religious ideologies. The Communist party—the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA)—attracted some support among intellectuals and students, while Soviet military training and assistance programs enabled Moscow to recruit a network of officers loyal to the PDPA. In the 1960s

and 1970s, a handful of Islamist cells associated with the Muslim Brotherhood and funded by Pakistan appeared. Yet, none of these groups commanded the support of anything more than an insignificant fraction of the Afghan people.

All of this changed after the successful Communist coup in 1978. The Soviet Union spent a decade fighting a losing effort to prop up its local ally. Meanwhile, Pakistan and Iran created more than a dozen resistance groups, almost all of which were led by extremist Islamist ideologues. After the fall of the Communists, these militant factions fell upon each other in a vicious civil war. The Taliban movement emerged from this chaos, and triumphed with Pakistani support.

Thus, the Communist coup fundamentally shifted the character of Afghan politics from a system that managed political relations within the traditional social structure to one based on violent competition for power among foreign-supported radical factions. The challenge of recreating a stable, moderate Afghanistan lies in reversing this cataclysmic shift, reopening the political process to Afghanistan's traditional social leaders while marginalizing the extremists and warlords who have ruled for the past quarter century.

**Selecting the Right Local Allies.** The success of postwar state-building depends on the wise selection of local allies during the military phase of operations. The simple truth is that those who are selected as allies during the fighting almost always have a significant political advantage after the war. A serious mistake in choosing wartime allies will narrow postwar options or introduce intractable complications.

The disastrous consequences of picking the wrong allies in Afghanistan was evident in the 1980s, when Washington funded a multi-billion dollar covert assistance program for the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation. Instead of

ence the process of differentiating strategic and tactical allies but three important ones are readily apparent.

First, a strategic ally must share U.S. interests, values, and objectives. As U.S. policymakers thought about postwar

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thinking about the potential postwar order during the war, the United States blindly relied on Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate to manage the covert program. As a result, ISI chose how much assistance various Afghan groups received, and provided the bulk of support to four fundamentalist parties: Hezb-e-Islami of Hekmatyar Gulbiddin, Hezb-e-Islami of Younis Khalis, Jamiat-e-Islami of Burhannudin Rabbani, and Ittihad-e-Islami Barai Azadi of Abdul Rasul Sayaf. These organizations were avowedly hostile to the United States and deeply connected to the international jihadist movement. Consequently, the fundamentalist parties, along with ISI, paved the way for the arrival of so-called "Afghan Arabs"—jihadists who came to Pakistan and Afghanistan for paramilitary training—and the formation of al Qaeda.

To facilitate postwar state-building, the United States should have distinguished between strategic and tactical local allies in its wartime strategy. A strategic ally is one that the United States would happily see assume a central role in the postwar political order. A tactical ally is a group that might provide some benefit to the war effort but that is either dispensable or undesirable in terms of postwar state-building. Many factors influ-

state-building, they should have put a premium on collaborating with groups that shared the United States's agenda. Though this may sound obvious, the record of U.S. support for Afghan fundamentalist groups in the 1980s suggests that the point needs to be made. Today, this means that the United States should develop a strategic partnership with those elements of the traditional social structure, pre-war technocratic elite, and exile community who seek to recreate a moderate, broad-based, and participatory Afghan state.

Second, a strategic ally must have significant social support. The value of partners varies directly with the popular support they command. If a principal local ally lacks broad support, putting it into power will mean that the United States will have to buy political support or social peace from other groups to prop up its client. Moreover, the history of Afghanistan in the 1980s and 1990s is a story of successive failed attempts by foreign powers to sustain local clients with extremely narrow bases of support. Given Afghanistan's demography, mountainous geography, and traditionally weak centralism, any regime with a narrow social base faces almost inevitable political or military challenges.

Third, a strategic ally must have experienced leaders. The realities of power dictate that the United States cannot simply select groups that espouse universal concern for human rights and democracy as its principal allies. In Central and Eastern Europe, dissidents with little or no political experience came to power in “velvet revolutions” and govern effectively only because Communist parties were demoralized, Germany had become a normal European power, and Russia was in internal disarray. Afghanistan’s neighborhood and domestic politics are not as conducive to the rise of poet-statesmen. The United States has to take into account whether particular groups have what it takes to be effective allies in their specific political contexts.

If U.S. policymakers had applied these criteria when they were planning the war against the Taliban, they would have developed balanced ties between the Rome Group and the Northern alliance, rather than partnering exclusively with the latter. Organized by Zahir Shah, the Rome Group sought to create a broad-based, moderate state; had the capability of mobilizing most of Afghan society (and substantial military power) through traditional social structures; and had capable, experienced leaders who had run the country before 1978. At the same time, the political agenda, history, and capacity of the Northern Alliance did not suggest that the group would make a good strategic ally. Its political leaders—Rab-bani and Sayaf—were Islamic fundamentalists. In fact, both had been mentors of Osama bin Laden in the 1980s. Other Northern Alliance leaders, including Fahim and the slain Ahmed Shah Massoud, entered politics through the Muslim Brotherhood. The Northern Alliance had a close relationship with the

clerical regime in Iran. Moreover, Rab-bani’s earlier attempt to establish a dictatorship had destroyed virtually all of his political support outside a few provinces. The only credit of the Northern Alliance was its active forces in the field.

Given this background, the United States should have adopted a united front strategy, an approach well suited to handling a fluid revolutionary situation. This strategy calls for uniting all opponents of the “main enemy” in a common front during the war while retaining control over resource allocation. After defeating the main enemy, the leader of the alliance can shift the united front against any member that threatens its objectives, progressively winnowing down the front to those groups that are fully reliable allies in the long term.

In Afghanistan, the United States should have brought all anti-Taliban groups—but principally the Rome Group and the Northern Alliance—into a united front to defeat Mullah Omar. Washington should have regulated the military progress of anti-Taliban forces by controlling air strikes and the distribution of material and money. As it did so, the United States should have made the Rome Group its strategic ally because it could mobilize the greatest military resistance to the Taliban and because it offered greater promise for postwar political reconstruction. It should have brought the Northern Alliance along as a tactical ally, taking advantage of its forces in the field and offering it an appropriate place after the war. In this way, the United States could have avoided a situation where Fahim and his faction emerged from the war with a monopoly on force. Even if the Northern Alliance had won the race to Kabul, this approach would have allowed the United States to

isolate Fahim, forcing him to compromise and share power.

If the United States had understood the relative strengths of the various anti-Taliban groups and had adopted a united front strategy, the political setting for postwar state-building would have been dramatically better. Karzai has made a brave attempt to stand up to Fahim and to extend the reach of the central government against the power of warlords. However, in the absence of political-military power, Karzai must rely on the United States to enforce his writ. Since U.S. policymakers are reluctant to intervene in the political competition and struggles of Afghan groups—fearing that choosing one side makes Americans targets of the other—Karzai has had a difficult time getting his orders to stick.

It is still not too late to adopt a united front strategy to repair the damage. Given its vast resources and military power, the United States can peel away elements of the Northern Alliance from Fahim, a task made easier by his imperious conduct even toward his erstwhile allies. Factions and warlords can be induced to align themselves with Karzai, which will then create a more balanced political situation to strike the deals necessary to build new institutions. However, in terms of the general approach, it is more difficult to use united front tactics after the war than it would have been during the more fluid time of military conflict.

**Reconstituting the Political Order.** The task of constituting the postwar political order requires the United States to address two important questions. First, to what extent will the United States directly impose a new government of its own choosing versus allowing some form of popular participation in the formation

of the new government? Second, to what extent will the United States retain control over the various aspects of reconstituting the political order (e.g. establishing political institutions, creating or reforming the armed forces, promoting economic reconstruction) versus delegating those functions to international organizations or other powers?

So far, the United States has adopted an awkward middle ground. On the one hand, the United States created enormous expectations among the Afghan people through the Bonn process. These expectations were palpable at the Loya Jirga, where elected delegates denounced radical factions like Rabbani's Jamiat-e-Islami and warlordism. On the other hand, the United States disappointed those expectations by failing to dismiss Fahim's threats and support the movement to elect Zahir Shah as head of state. Delegates who had run real risks in opposing militia leaders and warlords were left to fend for themselves. The United States created the impression that it would allow popular participation only if it rubber stamped a predetermined outcome.

At the same time, U.S. policy is handicapped by a lack of unified command. The initial desire to end U.S. involvement quickly prompted policymakers to fragment control over postwar state-building: The United Nations controlled the Bonn process and the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF); U.S. forces led the fight against al Qaeda and Taliban remnants; Germany began training the new national police; the United States was to train the Afghan armed forces; and foreign aid donors created a patchwork of programs. Even within the U.S. government, there appears to be conflicting jurisdictions on

reconstruction. Some observers note that the Department of Defense was tasked with reconstruction programs in northern Afghanistan, while the U.S. Agency for International Development controlled programs in the south. As a result of this apparent fragmentation, the United States is in a poor position to coordinate its state-building strategy.

In a sense, this resulted in the worst of both worlds. By not enforcing the Bonn process at the Loya Jirga, the United States lost a chance to use overwhelming popular sentiment to reduce its dependence on Fahim. Consequently, U.S. policy remained hostage to Fahim and his monopoly of military power in Kabul. Also, the failure of the United States to allow the delegates to elect Zahir Shah, their preferred candidate, created a profound crisis of legitimacy for the central government and in turn, for U.S. policy. Many Afghan groups felt disenfranchised by the outcome of the Loya Jirga. With effective power still monopolized by a clique of Tajiks from the Panjshir Valley, it is not surprising that many Pushtuns, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and others are disaffected. Because they constitute an overwhelming majority of the population, this discontent creates a dangerous political powder keg, the fuse of which could easily be lit by a rival regional power such as Pakistan.

This places an extraordinary premium on handling the last phase of the Bonn process—the writing of the constitution and selection of the permanent government—in a way that breaks Fahim's monopoly of power and enfranchises all of the groups in Afghanistan's diverse population. Fahim and his colleagues know that they will lose power if there is more popular participation in the shaping of the future government. Consequently,

Fahim and Islamists associated with Rab-bani have every incentive to try and short-circuit the process. The United States must be vigilant against any move to sabotage the process in the run up to the constitutional Loya Jirga and elections. It also must be prepared for a replay of the confrontation with Fahim if, as expected, he does not get the votes he needs.

**Conclusion.** In the mid-1990s, a widely discussed journal article argued that superpowers “don't do windows.” This was shorthand for the argument that the United States should reserve its forces for maintaining the balance of power and fighting major regional conflicts while avoiding the pedestrian tasks of peace-keeping and humanitarian operations. This mindset carried over into strategic thinking on the war against terrorism. The dominant policy view was that the United States should destroy rogue regimes but should leave the task of cleaning up the postwar mess to others. As one Department of Defense planner told me, “It's our job to destroy the enemy and then move on.”

The case of the war in Afghanistan shows that this perspective is both short sighted and counterproductive. In terms of eliminating al Qaeda in and around Afghanistan, a new Afghan government that consolidates the gains of U.S. military operations is necessary. If U.S.-sponsored state-building fails in Afghanistan—if no new regime capable of policing Afghan territory takes shape—al Qaeda will easily move back into Afghanistan from Pakistan. And, al Qaeda's presence need not take the blatant form of major training camps. Simply recreating a secure sanctuary for its command structures is sufficient to increase the threat of future terrorism.



Even in the longer term, successful state-building in Afghanistan is in the United States's national interest. Just as the cold war was won as a result of the political transformation of Eastern Europe, the war against terrorism will be won by transforming the region from North Africa to Indonesia. This historical struggle will be a marathon, not a sprint, and each U.S. intervention should be designed to maximize the benefits of regime change in each case. If the case of Afghanistan turns out well—if the United States facilitates the creation of a moderate and broad-based government—it will have a major demonstrative effect in Iran, and will put the United States in a much better position to shape events in Pakistan.

However, the United States's state-building policies have not maximized potential gains in Afghanistan. As long as Fahim and his Islamist colleagues control the political process, the legitimacy and

stability of the government will be precarious. Though some officials in the United States understand these problems well and are advocating major adjustments in strategy and policy, a consensus has not yet formed over the actions needed to facilitate the rise of a moderate, broad-based government. It is not too late to engineer a positive outcome in Afghanistan. However, the danger is that, as the clock on the final phase of the Bonn process ticks and as the patience of disenfranchised Afghan groups wears thin, the options for the United States will continue to dwindle.

During the 1992 presidential campaign, Bill Clinton's political strategist, James Carville, crafted the slogan, "It's the economy, stupid" to keep the campaign focused on this central vulnerability of the incumbent's record. In the war against terrorism, the Bush administration would be well advised to adopt a similar focal point: "It's the regime, stupid."