



Remember Afghanistan? A Glass Half Full, On the Titanic

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In June 2005, a U.S. infantry battalion hunting for Taliban insurgents in the Zabol province of southern Afghanistan came upon the remote village of Badamtay, where they were warmly greeted. After providing gifts of medicine and toys, the commanding officer asked to speak with the village elder. The elder, when asked about the Taliban, replied that they had not been seen for months. The officer launched into what he termed his “unity speech,” urging the villagers to present their needs to Zabol’s governor and to vote in the upcoming parliamentary elections. The elder smiled and nodded and thanked the Americans for their generosity. Only later did the interpreter recount that the elder had found even the officer’s modest steps too dangerous. “If I do that, I won’t stay alive very long,” the elder told him. “You guys are very nice. But you only come around once in a while. The Taliban will come here as soon as you are gone.”¹

This exchange represents Afghanistan’s dilemma in microcosm. Since the Taliban were ousted in 2001, the nation has made substantial progress in refugee repatriation and education, women’s rights, and democratic governance. Yet this progress has been wholly contingent upon international aid and security forces—neither of which will persist indefinitely. The nation now has but a brief window of opportunity to achieve self-sufficiency and escape the cycle of poverty and violence that has enveloped it for more than a generation. As Larry Sampler, former chief of staff for the United Na-

tions in Afghanistan put it, “Considering the prospects for the future of Afghanistan, using the ‘glass half full’ analogy misses the point. The glass—whether half-full or half-empty—is perched on a buffet table on the Titanic.”²

Any failed state may present a threat to international security, but Afghanistan’s collapse would be particularly destabilizing. At the fault line of the Persian, Pakistani, and Russian plates, the country is in a precarious position and its collapse would send shock waves from Kashmir to Chechnya, from Tehran to Islamabad, and would provide jihadists with a highly symbolic second victory over a superpower.

The story need not have unfolded this way. Afghanistan would be further along the path to sustainable security had the international community invested more (and more wisely) during the first several years of the intervention. From the beginning, the United States, lead partner in the effort to establish security in Afghanistan, pressed for a light international military presence; embroilment in Iraq further diverted resources and attention. Despite Afghanistan’s position on the front lines of the struggle against radical jihadism, the international community has pursued a minimalist approach, both in troop commitments and reconstruction funding.

Data from past stability operations is illustrative. Several studies suggest that a stable Afghanistan would require security forces on the order of 200,000 men; today, the combined international and national

forces fall short of this benchmark by 80,000.³ A separate RAND study notes that high per capita aid in the early years of an intervention correlates with relative success, as in Bosnia (\$679 per capita), Kosovo (\$526), and East Timor (\$233). On the other side of the coin is Afghanistan, which received a scant \$57 per capita.⁴

With resources tight, decision makers were forced to address short-term needs at the expense of longer term priorities. This malnourishment at the formative stage is a major reason that Afghanistan, four years after the fall of the Taliban, has failed to establish a revenue base or the capacity to deliver services.

Afghanistan is today a shell of a state facing daunting development challenges and an accelerating insurgency. According to recent congressional testimony by the head of the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency, insurgents “now represent a greater threat to the expansion of Afghan government authority than at any point since late 2001.”⁵ The hard-core Taliban may be temporarily defunct as a national movement, but they have prepared themselves for a long struggle. A central narrative among Afghanistan’s spoilers—militia leaders, narcotics traffickers, the insurgents, and their backers—is that the international presence will be short-lived.

The United States and 60 other donors met in London in January and declared that they would “stay the course” in Afghanistan. They pledged military and reconstruction support for the next five years. However, many Afghans, mindful of their abandonment by Washington and the rest of the world after the Soviet retreat in 1989, remain skeptical.

Will Afghanistan receive the long-term support it needs? Western publics remain casualty-averse and opposition parties in the Netherlands, Canada, and Britain have had success playing to these concerns. James Dobbins, an expert on stability operations at the RAND Corporation and a former special

envoy to Afghanistan, notes that even as most Western powers downsize their armies, interventions are being launched at a rising clip (every 6 months for U.N.-led and every 24 months for U.S.-led interventions); as a result, “the demand for nation-building is fast outpacing the supply of nation-builders.”⁶ America’s precipitous national debt and military overextension in Iraq bring its future commitments into doubt. While the American public typically supports operations in Afghanistan, rebuilding the country ranked dead last in a recent poll in which respondents were asked to rank the importance of 30 international concerns.⁷

A Different Approach to Security

The government of Afghanistan must build a solid economic and political foundation so that it can provide security in the absence of substantial foreign assistance. This is no easy task. Afghanistan’s government ranks among the world’s weakest and its people among the most destitute. The country relies on international assistance not only for reconstruction projects but for core operating expenditures, such as army, police, and government salaries. It is among the bottom 1 percent of nations in effectiveness of rule of law, with endemic corruption. Militia commanders and narco-traffickers rule swaths of the country.⁸

The good news is that a sound plan now exists to meet these challenges: the Afghanistan Compact, agreed to by the 60 international donors and the Afghan government at the London Conference in January, sets benchmarks and responsibilities on security, governance, and economic development. It is a sound framework, but one that relies on substantial and sustained commitments—both military and economic.

Up to now, the lion’s share of international spending in Afghanistan has been aimed at improving security, to the detriment of other concerns. The trouble is that efforts to date have been narrowly directed toward counterinsurgency operations that

cannot succeed without progress in other sectors.

The threats to Afghanistan's security are far broader than the insurgency. Consolidating legitimate national authority involves disarming all illegal armed groups, many of whom have strong ethnic ties, access to opium revenues, and foreign backing. Establishing a capable and inclusive state whose authority is backed by a professional and well-paid army requires strong performance on the other two pillars of the Afghanistan Compact: governance and economic development.

Washington's primary goal in Afghanistan was to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Reconstruction was seen as a means to this end but was given only secondary attention and funding. From 2001 to 2005, according to the Congressional Research Service, the United States allocated \$66.5 billion to the Department of Defense—almost two and a half times Afghanistan's total reconstruction needs. The United States has spent 11 times as much on military operations as it has on reconstruction, humanitarian aid, economic assistance, and training for Afghan security forces combined.⁹ The plan has been more “martial” than “Marshall.”

This narrow approach led to victory in battle after battle but has not won the war. In fact, 2005 was the bloodiest year since 2001: insurgent attacks were up 20 percent, coalition fatalities rose from 58 to 129, total fatalities were more than 1,500, and lethal tactics new to Afghanistan (including suicide bombings and more sophisticated roadside explosives) spread.¹⁰

Defeating an insurgency requires providing past and potential combatants with alternatives; it is a political process as much as a military one. Though U.S. military commanders recognized that winning public support was critical to undercutting the insurgency, the strategy was not successfully operationalized. Efforts to win hearts and minds were undermined, not only by errant

bombs and extralegal civilian detentions but also by the Afghan government's inability to provide development, services, and political integration to the Pashtun belt, where the insurgency draws its support. This failure is attributable not to insufficient military action, but to inadequate economic assistance.

The NATO Connection

Even as Afghanistan's security deteriorated, the United States announced that it was reducing its forces by 2,500 (13 percent). The announcement alarmed Afghans because it seemed driven by political rather than by military necessity. American forces will be replaced in the south by those of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), under the command of NATO. The expansion will add 6,000 peacekeepers, bringing the ISAF total to 15,000. It calls for the Canadians to run operations in Kandahar, the British in Helmand, and the Dutch in Uruzgan.

ISAF engagement has been thus far limited to “showing the flag” in remote districts, offering support to the Afghan National Army, funding quick-impact development projects, and facilitating negotiations between fractious militia leaders who were ostensibly on the national government's side. They have not had a mandate to provide a full spectrum of security for Afghans or for development personnel. “If you're going to call these troops security forces,” said one senior U.N. official, “then put ‘security’ in quotes and tell us what specifically you mean by it.” NATO units have typically not been equipped or authorized to prevent widespread violence, engage in policing, or suppress Afghan-on-Afghan violence.

The effectiveness of these units is hobbled by “national caveats” that various governments have issued with respect to their military deployments in Afghanistan. Madrid, for example, restricted Afghan personnel from traveling on Spanish aircraft,

while Berlin prohibited its troops from leaving camp after dark or without a mobile medical unit, making patrols virtually impossible. The list of such caveats—reportedly ten pages long—exasperates ISAF commanders, whose orders must be relayed to national capitals and back before action can be taken.

Despite these restrictions, ISAF forces have proven fairly effective in the relatively stable provinces of north, west, and central Afghanistan. The south presents serious challenges. British forces will operate in Helmand, the largest drug-producing region, where they will face criminal elements and a mostly indigenous insurgency funded by drug revenues; an understaffed Canadian team in Kandahar will face a cross-border insurgency with roots in Pakistan.¹¹ Both are likely to be tested early and often.

The British, Canadian, and Dutch forces may well prove these concerns unfounded by showing that they are willing and able to engage in robust operations. In principle, they have agreed to dispense with national caveats. But what will happen when command of the south passes, as it is scheduled to do in six months, to less assertive NATO allies, such as Germany or Italy? The modus operandi of ISAF forces has been to minimize risks, and this precludes anything but modest results. These forces should not be expected to fill the security gap.

Pakistan's Crucial Role

For decades, Afghanistan's security situation has been undermined by its neighbors, who have armed and funded surrogate forces to advance their national goals. Today, however, Russia, Iran, India, and the Central Asian republics recognize that they stand to lose more than they will gain by fueling the conflict and have reined in their support for their proxies.

Pakistan is another story. The insurgency's revival is a function of the increased flow of jihadists, plus money and matériel, from within Pakistan. An infusion of for-

eign fighters, including guerrillas with experience in Chechnya and Iraq, has increased the professionalism of insurgent operations, as evinced by a highly coordinated June 2005 raid that killed three U.S. SEALs and downed a Chinook rescue helicopter. There is no conclusive data as to whether the insurgency has grown or contracted, but its tactical adaptations have been effective.¹² By improving their marksmanship, operating in smaller units (a dozen men instead of a hundred), and increasingly targeting the Afghan army and police forces, insurgents have inflicted higher casualties and prevented the government from projecting authority.

The insurgency could not exist as it does today without support from Pakistan. The Taliban, essentially a Pakistani creation from the decade of the Soviet occupation (1979–89), is today seen by some members of Pakistan's military and its intelligence agency as a means to extend Islamabad's influence. Militant Taliban openly train and recruit in Quetta, a hundred miles from Kandahar, and retain the support of tribal elites in the frontier provinces and of Pakistani Islamic parties.

It is not clear that Pakistani president Pervez Musharraf could rein in these elements indefinitely, even were he to make it his top priority. Islamabad has shown, however, that it can deliver results when pressed, as when an October 2003 visit by Undersecretary of State Richard Armitage triggered a sharp decrease in insurgent operations.

Sustaining Security

Economic development is the key to Afghanistan's future, since neither security nor governance is sustainable without rapid and continued growth. The dual challenge is to increase the size of the legal economy and the revenues drawn from it.

Developing the Afghan army and police force is critical to a sustainable and secure Afghanistan. Currently Afghanistan fields

an army of 30,000 troops and a police force of 45,000. The cost of training and salaries, paid by the United States, is itself larger than the government's budget. A large, professional, and adequately paid army would contribute to security, but Afghanistan must dramatically increase its revenues before this becomes feasible.

Ashraf Ghani, a former World Bank senior official and Afghanistan's finance minister, has calculated that to keep up with the institutions established for it, Afghanistan must double its per capita output every ten years within the legal economy.¹³ Even high-income crops such as saffron and black cumin will not be sufficient to sustain this growth rate, so Afghanistan's revenues must come also from industry, natural resources, and trade. None of these projects is possible without security, credit, and a vastly improved infrastructure of roads, water, and electricity.

Even if donor support and economic growth remains strong, the International Monetary Fund forecasts that sustaining Afghanistan's professional army, which will reach at least 45,000 men, and its ambitious development program will require a doubling or tripling of the tax revenue-to-GDP (gross domestic product) ratio. While such growth has been achieved in some other postconflict countries, such as Rwanda and Uganda, it is a tall order in Afghanistan where customs streams are controlled by militia commanders and tribal leaders.¹⁴

Despite its centrality, economic development has been consistently shortchanged in favor of higher-profile priorities such as military operations and elections. A RAND study suggests that \$100 per capita is the minimum investment for a successful stability operation; to meet this benchmark, reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan would have to be doubled, to \$3 billion annually.¹⁵

The London Conference resulted in five-year pledges totaling \$10.5 billion, but

there is no guarantee that this aid will materialize. At two previous conferences (in Tokyo in 2002, and in Berlin in 2004), donors pledged a total of \$13.4 billion toward Afghanistan's estimated reconstruction needs of \$27.5 billion over seven years. However, by February 2005, donors had implemented only \$3.3 billion in reconstruction projects.¹⁶

The failure to deliver results during the first several years has contributed to the persistence of the insurgency and the explosion of the narco-economy. From 2001 to 2004, drug revenues overshadowed reconstruction funds by a two-to-one margin, tilting power further toward criminals and strongmen. At one point, intervention in the narco-economy might have prevented it from spreading, but it is today too entrenched to address head on.

Building Effective Government

Whatever their flaws, Afghanistan's 2004 presidential and 2005 parliamentary elections laid the foundation for a potentially legitimate government. Yet Afghans today see instead a state unable to deliver services or set priorities. Without legitimacy, every action a government takes is met with resistance.

Today three-quarters of the development aid that is delivered is provided not by the Afghan government but through a parallel public sector comprising contractors and nongovernmental organizations. The Afghanistan Compact calls for the delivery of aid through channels that strengthen, rather than circumvent, the authority of the elected government. But the process will be difficult to implement because Afghan capacity is so meager.

Four years ago, donors were faced with a dilemma of working within the nascent Afghan government or circumventing it. "Capacity building" was trumped by short-term imperatives. In many cases, this was the right choice: the needs, from building schools and repatriating refugees to promot-

ing elections, were enormous, and donors did not have enough money to both get the job done and build capacity within Afghanistan's government or its private sector.

Today, donors find themselves in the same quandary. The only way to build capacity is to invest in capacity, and consistent failure to do so has left in place the same bottlenecks. Donors should emphasize the use of local goods and services, even at the cost of short-term efficiency. In recent months, Britain has committed to giving its aid directly through the Afghan government. The World Bank has established several trust funds that are responsive to government priorities while controlling against corruption. Yet two of the biggest donors—the United States and Japan—continue to channel their funding through their national aid agencies, circumventing Afghan authority.

The Afghanistan Compact represents the last best chance to create sustainable structures in Afghanistan. There is a narrow window—perhaps no more than two or three years—in which to maintain momentum before donor fatigue or a new emergency sets in. International efforts have fallen short for a variety of reasons, but the root of the problem is that reconstruction in Afghanistan was attempted “on the cheap.” Regardless of the approach, it is impossible to scale a 15-foot wall with a 7-foot ladder.

Key Issues

If Afghanistan is not to lapse once more into chaos, the United States and other donor nations must focus on a few key issues.

First, NATO forces are necessary but not sufficient. To alleviate Afghanistan's acute security gap, NATO forces must augment rather than replace coalition forces.

Second, security cannot continue to be prioritized at the expense of governance and economic development. Afghan army and police personnel are only forces for security so long as their salaries are paid. Moreover,

the insurgency cannot be defeated by military means alone. The United States in particular must allocate its resources more broadly to achieve sustainable security.

Third, a war on drugs must be avoided. Opium revenues now account for at least a third of Afghanistan's total economy. These revenues allow drug traffickers, many of whom also maintain armed militias and hold government positions, to act with impunity and undermine Kabul's authority. Nevertheless, there is little that the Afghan government or international donors can productively do in the short run to roll back opium production. The goal must be to transform the conditions that permit the narco-economy to flourish: insecurity and economic stagnation. A case in point is the 2005 eradication program. Originally hailed as a success, the program contributed to a 20 percent drop in cultivation of the opium poppy last year. However, a United Nations “rapid assessment survey” predicts that these gains will be erased this year. There are at present no realistic alternatives to poppy cultivation for most of Afghanistan's farmers.¹⁷ Yet Afghanistan's drug revenues are large only relative to its meager economy, and even modest improvements in its rural economy—achieved through better infrastructure and the provision of credit, debt relief, and security—could allow eradication and law enforcement efforts to succeed.

Fourth, international efforts to establish the rule of law must be redoubled. The case of Abdul Rahman, a Christian convert charged with apostasy and threatened with execution, is only the most publicized of the many failures of legal reform.¹⁸

Lastly, greater external diplomatic engagement is needed if Pakistan is to withdraw its support from the Taliban. The Bush administration, despite its rhetoric with respect to democracy promotion, continues to channel massive assistance to a military regime that is part of the problem.

The international coalition enters its fifth year in Afghanistan with the toughest

challenge ahead: sustaining past progress. Four years' experience in Afghanistan has transformed the way many military and development experts view their role there. "A lot of learning has gone on within the military community," observes Larry Sampler. "They understand that while the kinetic actions of the military are necessary, they are not sufficient. And that to eliminate support for insurgent elements, capacity has to be built within the government. International military forces can only provide temporary and artificial security, during which time the state must prove it can provide for people's real needs."

Success in Afghanistan will depend, to a great extent, on how well this understanding percolates up to the decision makers in Washington. ●

Notes

1. N. C. Aizenman, "Fighting a Hard, Half-Forgotten War," *Washington Post*, June 22, 2005.

2. Interview with Larry Sampler, March 17, 2006. The later quote is also from this interview.

3. James T. Quinlivan, "Force Requirements in Security Operations," *Parameters*, vol. 25 (winter 1995–96), pp. 59–69; James Dobbins, *America's Role in Nation-building: From Germany to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2003); James Dobbins, *The UN's Role in Nation-building: From the Congo to Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005), cited in Seth G. Jones, "Averting Failure in Afghanistan," *Survival*, vol. 48 (spring 2006), pp. 111–28.

4. Dobbins, *UN's Role in Nation-building*.

5. Greg Miller, "U.S. Official Says Taliban Is on the Rise," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2006.

6. James Dobbins, "NATO's Role in Nation-building," *NATO Review*, summer 2005.

7. "American Attitudes toward National Security, Foreign Policy and the War on Terror," Security and Peace Initiative, April 13, 2005.

8. Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, *Governance Matters IV: Governance Indicators for 1996–2004* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2005).

9. Total funding for "Foreign and Diplomatic Funds, FY2001-FY2005" which encompasses these

categories, was \$5.7 billion. See Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and Enhanced Base Security Since 9/11" (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, October 3, 2005), p. 14.

10. "Coalition Military Fatalities by Year: Operation Enduring Freedom," <http://icasualties.org/oef>; "U.S. Official Says Taliban Is on the Rise," *Los Angeles Times*, March 1, 2006; Carl Robichaud "Iraq to Afghanistan: Afghan Jihadists Adopt Iraq Tactics," Afghanistan Watch, The Century Foundation (New York), November 13, 2005, at www.afghanistanwatch.org.

11. The insurgency is multifaceted and differs by region. On the southeast border there is closer Taliban and al-Qaeda collaboration; further north, Gulbeddin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami forces are supported by al-Qaeda. Interview with Barnett R. Rubin, Center for International Cooperation, New York University, March 7, 2006.

12. According to the Brookings Institution's "Afghanistan Index," the estimated size of the insurgency ranges between 2,000 and 10,000 fighters.

13. Ashraf Ghani, "Rebuilding Afghanistan," *Global Agenda Magazine*, 2004 ed., <http://www.globalagendamagazine.com/2004/ashrafghani.asp>.

14. Uganda doubled its tax revenue/GDP ratio from 6 percent to around 12 percent in the late 1990s; Rwanda tripled its ratio from 4 percent in 1994 to 12 percent in 2002. See World Bank, "Afghanistan: Managing Public Finances for Development," Main Report, (vol. 1), December 22, 2005.

15. Seth G. Jones, Jeremy Wilson, Andrew Rathmell, and Jack Riley, *Establishing Law and Order after Conflict* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2005); Dobbins, *America's Role in Nation-building*; idem, *UN's Role in Nation-building*.

16. A joint Government of Afghanistan/World Bank study estimated total needs at \$27.5 billion over seven years ("Securing Afghanistan's Future: Accomplishments and the Strategic Path Forward," March 17, 2004). Data on "initiated" and "completed" projects drawn from Barnett Rubin, Hamayun Hamidzada, and Abby Stoddard, *Afghanistan 2005 and Beyond* (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, April 2005), p. 62.

17. As Barnett Rubin notes, last year's drop was almost entirely attributable to a 96 percent decrease in cultivation in a single province: Nangahar. Farm-

ers there were disappointed when promises of substantial assistance never came through, and this year they reverted to growing poppy ("Afghanistan at a Crossroads," Roundtable Report, The Century Foundation, December 7, 2005).

18. See United States Institute of Peace, "Establishing the Rule of Law in Afghanistan," special report no. 117, March 2004.