

Stabilizing Afghanistan: Threats and Challenges

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SUMMARY

- Afghanistan cannot be stabilized by quick fixes. The United States, NATO, and their allies need to make a sustained commitment for the long term.
- Instead of a simple “surge,” there needs to be a much clearer focus on bringing security to Afghans’ daily lives. Only once this is achieved will Afghanistan’s government have real reservoirs of legitimacy.
- Afghanistan has not been served well by its 2004 Constitution, which created a dysfunctional system of government that relies too much on the president alone. The United States should support systemic reforms, first through the development of an effective executive office to support the Afghan president.
- Counternarcotics policies in Afghanistan must take account of domestic socioeconomic complexities, and be based on long-term development projects that increase the returns from cultivating different crops.
- Serious thought needs to be given to encouraging more Muslim states to contribute personnel to support the promotion of human security and development in Afghanistan.
- Pakistan needs to be pressured discreetly but very strongly to arrest the Afghan Taliban leadership in Pakistan.

The next president of the United States will face a daunting set of challenges in seeking to stabilize Afghanistan and its region. Yet this is one part of the world where the temptation to keep a safe distance is not a realistic option. It remains the prime operational area for al-Qaeda; it is replete with interconnected security dilemmas with the potential to flare into highly destructive open conflict; and it is an area where the reputations of both the United States and NATO are squarely on the line. All this suggests that Afghanistan will be at the top of the next president’s foreign

policy agenda and is likely to remain there for some considerable time.

The recent experience of the “troop surge” in Iraq may tempt the next U.S. president to focus on expanding troop numbers in Afghanistan. But Afghanistan is a rather different case. Before heading down such a path, it is vital to reflect on what use should be made of troops and military resources in Afghanistan. If the legitimacy of the post-Taliban transition is to be enhanced, U.S. troops must first of all help bring security to the small villages where more than half of the Afghan people



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live. But raw numbers are only a small part of this story. In Afghanistan, village and district power structures are often made up of collections of notables. Outside actors can only gain the support of these leading locals by making sustained efforts to engage them and by living in their midst for a considerable time. Yet military personnel are often rotated out of an area just as they are beginning to make progress with these kinds of residents.

All this points to the huge importance of a long-term vision. After the failings of recent years, there is simply no shortcut to stabilizing Afghanistan.

The Burden of Recent History

To understand why the challenges Afghanistan faces are so daunting, it is necessary to appreciate how things have gone awry since the high tide of optimism immediately after the overthrow of the Taliban regime in November 2001. It is simply not the case that all was well until very recently. Rather, a number of crucial flaws in the international community's approach to Afghanistan have merely taken time to reveal themselves in all their ferocity. Three have been particularly significant.

First, though the Bonn Agreement between "non-Taliban" Afghan parties that was signed in December 2001 contained many positive features (such as the recognition of the need for an International Security Assistance Force, or ISAF, to help fill a security vacuum), it was executed with very little thought about its implications for the future structure of the Afghan state. Departments in the new interim administration were distributed to political factions as inducements to participate in the process; indeed, the recent memoirs of U.S. Ambassador James F. Dobbins show how new ministries were created simply so that there would be more prizes to go around. Because these factions were in many respects patronage networks rather than modern political parties, this set the scene for a spoils system of appointments to public office and encouraged fiendish competition for donor dollars, which

worked against the development of a consensually unified political elite.

Second, though blunt warnings to Pakistan secured a degree of cooperation in the period immediately after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, General Pervez Musharraf's administration proved a far-from-adequately in fighting radical transnational terrorism. Musharraf, like the military establishment from which he sprang, had been a patron of the Taliban, and with the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom, the key Taliban leadership and thousands of Taliban fighters simply relocated to Pakistan, where they took up open residence in the Pushtunabad area of the city of Quetta. In August 2007, during a visit to Kabul, Musharraf openly acknowledged the importance of these Taliban sanctuaries: "There is no doubt Afghan militants are supported from Pakistani soil. The problem that you have in your region is because support is provided from our side." This issue should have been immediately pursued by the major powers; instead, it was allowed to fester to the point where a local spin-off Pakistani Taliban movement has now become a serious challenge to the Pakistani state, greatly complicating the process of stabilizing the West Asian region.

Third, in early 2002 the Bush administration blocked ISAF's expansion beyond Kabul, causing a disastrous loss of momentum in Afghanistan, with consequences that simply compounded over time. In the aftermath of the Bonn Agreement, the vast majority of Afghans eagerly awaited the appearance of international forces in their districts. To those gripped by images of Afghans repelling the British in the nineteenth century and hammering the Soviets in the twentieth, this might seem quite perverse. But by 2001, ordinary Afghans had grown acutely aware of how much suffering they could expect at the hands of predatory militias or criminal gangs backed by regional powers with geopolitical objectives to pursue. When ISAF expansion was blocked (essentially to conserve airlift assets for future use in Iraq), this sent a signal to

Afghans that they should not be too confident about the strength of Western promises, and likewise sent a signal to Pakistan that it might be prudent to keep the Taliban alive as an asset for future use.

All this has come to pass. Afghans' confidence in their transition has plummeted. In 2004, 64 percent of Afghan respondents in a major survey felt that the country was moving in the right direction. By 2008, this proportion had plunged to 38 percent. In 2004, only 11 percent felt that the country was moving in the wrong direction. By 2008, this had nearly trebled, to 32 percent. These are alarming figures for both the current Afghan president, Hamid Karzai (who faces an election in 2009), and the next American president. This collapse of confidence comes in the context of a mounting insurgency in southern and eastern Afghanistan, and with U.S. forces coming under fire from Pakistani units near the Pakistan-Afghanistan frontier. The next U.S. president faces a dire inheritance in this part of the world.

Governance and Justice

One reason why many Afghans feel discontented is that their high hopes for the post-2001 state-building exercise have been disappointed. Some scholars have raised serious doubts about whether this enterprise was well conceived in the first place, and the Bush administration's approach to the complex challenges involved certainly seems to have been unduly casual—with Ambassador Robert Finn's pleas from Kabul for more assistance in the critical years of 2002 and 2003 going largely unanswered, and with Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad's perceived skills as a "fixer" receiving primacy from 2003 to 2005. However, any attempt to shift to a radically different approach in 2009 would not only be burdened by what has been done up to this point but would also run the risk of being seen as a cut-and-run strategy. The next U.S. president thus will need to promote several key state-building goals while recognizing

that Afghans are rightly sensitive about issues of sovereignty.

It would be useful, first of all, to reflect on whether Afghans have been well served by the strongly presidential system that was put in place at the 2004 constitutional Loya Jirga. For Americans, this system's appeal is obvious, not least because it establishes a clear executive leader with whom outside actors can deal.

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But in ethnically diverse Afghanistan, this system also has the severe downside of creating one winner and many losers, potentially fueling ethnic tensions. The system thus has put President Karzai, an honorable and decent incumbent with no ethnic agenda, in a very difficult position. His responsibilities—as symbolic head of state, as executive head of government, and as a one-man interagency coordinator—are simply too arduous and exacting for any single person, especially because there is no equivalent of the U.S. Executive Office of the President to assist him. Developing such an office—staffed not with Afghan expatriates but with young Afghans freshly trained for such work—would be a very positive initiative for a new U.S. president to support.

But it is not just the presidential system that needs repairing. The lower house of the Afghan Parliament is elected through a bizarre electoral system that favors independents and works against the emergence of political parties. The result is that many members of Parliament simply seek to secure benefits for particular constituencies without paying much attention to what might be good for the country as a whole, and ethnic identity has emerged in the absence of a party system as a basis for trying to create cohesive parliamentary blocs.

Although corruption is widely perceived as a serious problem in governance, the abuse

of power most rankles the citizenry. The next U.S. president must recognize that what may look like moral failings by Afghans are instead very often no more than rational responses to incentives created by poorly conceived policies in an environment where, as one Afghan official put it, “even an angel couldn’t be honest.”

After the failings of recent years, there is simply no shortcut to stabilizing Afghanistan.

Rather than pursuing the chimera of totally eliminating corruption, the next U.S. president should promote creative ways to improve the Afghan state’s key sectors. Local administration is one obvious candidate. Another is the justice sector. Afghans’ inability to secure justice through the corrupt courts has gravely damaged the government’s standing and has opened the door to the Taliban purporting to “restore law and order”—just as they claimed to have done in the mid-1990s. A focus on restorative rather than punitive justice might help, because restorative justice emphasizes reconciliation between perpetrators and victims; this could be reinforced by some use of traditional Afghan dispute resolution mechanisms identified in the *2007 Afghanistan Human Development Report*.

Narcotics

When one thinks of corruption in Afghanistan, one inevitably thinks of narcotics. The estimated opium output for 2008 is 7,700 metric tons, compared with 185 metric tons in 2001, the final year of Taliban rule. By any measure, this represents a colossal policy failure. Because domestic political realities constrain what any U.S. president can do in the realm of drug policy, it is highly likely that future U.S. approaches will still focus on supply. However, there are better and worse policy options, and it is important that the next president choose wisely.

In making policy choices, the first key point is that the problem of opium cultivation

in Afghanistan is exceedingly complex. There is no single opium “problem”; rather, diverse factors encourage opium production, and the mix of factors varies not just from province to province but also from district to district. The new U.S. president should reject any simple “solutions” that fail to recognize this complexity. Second, it is equally important to recognize that even carefully crafted solutions will not be instantly effective. Time and investment will be needed to make progress. Some will argue that time is simply not available; that drug money is fueling the insurgency, and that only a dramatic gesture such as spraying of crops with a potent herbicide will convey the message that drugs are beyond the pale. But such a gesture could lead to major problems. More than a million poor wage laborers are employed in harvesting the opium poppy. What they earn may make the difference between survival and destitution, and a million angry wage laborers in southern and eastern Afghanistan would be ideal recruits for the Taliban.

A third key point is that Afghans regard alcohol rather than opiates as the most socially disruptive drug. Westerners who demand that opiates be prohibited while continuing to drink alcohol are likely to be seen as “hypocrites” (*munafiqun*), one of the worst labels in the Islamic faith. (Afghans are also fully aware that in 2002, when the opium problem was still not huge, the United States shied away from crop eradication, on the basis that it was not part of the war on terrorism. Cynics assumed that this was because drug barons, out of pure self-interest, were supplying information about al-Qaeda to the Coalition forces.)

Fortunately, there are genuine alternatives to crop eradication. The volume of the Afghan cereal crop is vastly larger than that of the opium crop. However, there is little in the way of a banking system to assist those Afghan farmers who wish to borrow funds to invest in equipment for cereal cultivation. The farmers end up being driven into the arms of drug traffickers, who can lend them money but demand that they plant poppies

as collateral. International support for Afghan banking would therefore be a positive step. Also, because opium can be easily stored but vegetables are likely to spoil before they can reach profitable regional markets, the balance could be shifted by investing in widening and sealing roads and in refrigeration facilities. It would certainly be better to support farmers in growing familiar crops than to engage in yet another exercise in poorly designed crop substitution.

Human Security

The legitimacy of the Karzai government, of the broader transition process, and of the international presence in Afghanistan all depend heavily on a capacity to deliver security for the Afghan people. Global terrorism is not a major security threat to ordinary Afghans; they suffer its blows mainly by being in the wrong place at the wrong time. However, Afghans suffer very much from the strength of local predators—militias, criminal gangs, and thuggish petty power holders—as well as from the insurgents in the south. Finally, they suffer when they become caught in the crossfire as the United States and NATO pursue their enemies. Tactical successes for NATO and the United States could easily turn into major strategic failures if Afghans' patience runs out with the Western presence in their country.

There is much talk of increasing ISAF troop numbers in Afghanistan. As a signal of serious commitment, this would likely have a desirable effect. However, because the alleged threat to Afghan culture posed by “foreign forces” is a key element of Taliban propaganda, the next U.S. president could find it useful to look beyond NATO and the fourteen non-NATO states that now serve in Afghanistan to see whether more troops might be available from friendly Muslim states in regions such as Southeast Asia and northwest Africa. However, just as important as the force's size are the tasks it is given. The blocking of ISAF expansion eventually led to a reversion to the old “inkspot” theory of security, in which one

secures a center and then works outward from that point. The problem with this approach, however, is that it works far too slowly. Most Afghans live in small villages, and many of them are great travelers. Villages, not just towns, need to be secure, and internal trade between different parts of the country needs to be safe as well, although this is a problem not just of insecurity but also of poor roads and underdeveloped infrastructure.

In a number of conflicts where the United

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States has been involved, building up a country's institutions has been central to a strategy of avoiding local dependence and ultimately enabling the country to stand on its own feet. Those who recall “Vietnamization” may shudder at the thought, but it is hard to see sensible long-term alternatives. In following this type of strategy in Afghanistan, U.S. forces outside ISAF command have focused on training and otherwise strengthening the Afghan National Army. The next president should strongly reaffirm the commitments made to provide this assistance by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

However, Afghanistan is caught on the horns of a dilemma: It depends on the United States to fund the Afghan National Army, but it does not wish to be seen as an American puppet, because this plays straight into the Taliban's hands. Thus, the Afghan–U.S. security relationship must be handled with great sensitivity. Beyond this, it is now recognized that the Afghan National Police, supported by Germany as the lead nation, have failed to deliver. Though these police include brave, committed young officers, they need much more practical help and mentoring than they have received.

Nevertheless, the basic reality is that the areas of Afghanistan far from the Taliban's sanctuaries in Pakistan remain relatively stable, but those areas near the sanctuaries are profoundly insecure. To stabilize Afghanistan, therefore, the next U.S. president will need to confront the Pakistan problem—and given the pace of Pakistan's downward slide, he will need to confront it as a matter of urgency.

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The Region

Dealing with the threat posed by the Taliban's sanctuaries in Pakistan is hardly straightforward. Pakistan has a strong sense of existential insecurity that derives from its tense relationship with India, and from the loss of East Pakistan in 1971. It also has a radicalized military establishment, dating back to the permission that the late General Zia ul-Haq gave to religious groups to proselytize in military circles. And the new Pakistani government faces an alarming degree of popular anti-Americanism, which the Bush adminis-

tration's support for Musharraf—despite his unconstitutional removal of the chief justice in 2007—greatly aggravated. Even in the aftermath of the bombing of the Marriott Hotel in Islamabad on September 20, 2008, Pakistan has not been persuaded that the American war on terrorism is Pakistan's war as well.

Some very experienced observers have warned against putting public pressure on Pakistan. Given the ferocity of public antipathy to the United States, the Pakistani government does not benefit one iota from being seen to act at the behest of Washington. But here a dilemma arises: the less public pressure Washington puts on Pakistan, the more ordinary Afghans are likely to conclude that the United States has chosen to side with Pakistan—for all its perfidy—rather than Afghanistan. Therefore, pressure needs to be applied discreetly but very strongly on the Pakistani leaders to take some step that would unambiguously signal to Afghans that Pakistan will no longer meddle freely in Afghanistan. The obvious measure would be the arrest of the top Afghan Taliban leaders and their supporters in their Quetta sanctuary. This would be a much less demanding exercise than a major assault on the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, but it would send a very clear and positive message to Afghans. And it would also enable Pakistan to deal with its own Taliban

problem from a position of perceived strength, which is not presently the case.

More broadly, however, the next U.S. president will need to take the lead in seeking to confront the interlocking security dilemmas that have poisoned the West Asian political environment and turned Afghanistan into a theater of struggle for influence between diverse forces—Pakistani, Indian, Iranian, Russian, and Arab. In the long run, stabilizing Afghanistan will require paying attention to these deeper problems. Regionwide problems require regionally-focused solutions, addressing issues such as strained political relations, strategic vulnerabilities, and economic integration and cooperation in the spheres of transport and energy. A regional approach to such issues might ultimately result from a multinational gathering somewhat like the Helsinki Conference of 1975, but an enormous amount of groundwork would be required in preparation, with strong support from United States. Such a conference would also need to include Iran, a significant actor in the region—and, in the wake of the Iraq debacle, a more powerful one. Obviously, inviting Iran to the conference would also require careful preparation, but this is hardly something that a newly elected American president should fear. The potential dividends from stabilizing a very tense region would significantly outweigh the potential costs.

Conclusion

Afghanistan has suffered for many years from the tendency of leaders in Washington and other Western capitals to believe either that there are easy remedies for its problems or that its problems can be safely ignored. Yet when a country has experienced not just months or years but decades of disruption, it is unreal to think in such terms. Complex problems need carefully conceived responses, and when disrupted states are allowed to fes-

ter, their problems can easily become toxic for the international system. Afghanistan can find solutions to its problems, but those seeking to help it need great wisdom, courage, and farsightedness. This is the ultimate challenge that Afghanistan poses for the next U.S. president. ■

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