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Afghanistan: The Right Mission on the Wrong Footing

Daan Everts

Former senior Dutch diplomat. Served in various capacities in development and security missions of UN, EU, OSCE, and NATO. He currently lives and works in Belgrade, Serbia.

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If any country could appropriately be labeled a 'black hole', it was Afghanistan in the early 1990's. In preceding years it had generated selective international interest and support when struggling to free itself from Soviet imperialist rule. With liberation achieved and, partly as a result of this, the Soviet empire imploding — ending the Cold War — interest waned as Afghanistan was no longer of strategic interest. Tucked away between the Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia, it was left to its own devices — with disastrous consequences for the country itself, the region and the wider world.

Without international support for much needed reconstruction and nation building, it soon slid into a vicious, civil war. Years of chaos, ethnic strife and rampant violence followed. Widespread suffering and exasperation prepared the ground for any force that promised a quick end to lawlessness and insecurity. The rise of the Taliban — an austere, rural-based Islamist movement – from 1994 onwards was, therefore, a logical result of the international neglect and lack of empathy with a population that had been subjected to so much hardship and cruelty.

International indignation with the harsh conditions imposed by the regressive Taliban regime, once in control of most of the country in 1996, was also slow in developing. Afghanistan remained to be perceived as irrelevant in global geopolitical terms. It was only after the country became host to the extremist Al-Qaeda movement, which used the inaccessible parts of the country as its operating base, that world capitals started to become more concerned. Then 9/11 happened in 2001, abruptly propelling Afghanistan to the center of world politics and international security concerns.

With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that the tragic course of events inside Afghanistan, including those leading up to the horrific event of 9/11, have been very much the result of a persistent lack of international interest, solidarity and preventive diplomacy.

After 9/11

When, in the aftermath of 9/11, the Taliban regime was swept out of power by an American-led coalition force, an historic opportunity presented itself to restore Afghanistan if not to the glory of its far past, at least to a society with minimum standards of human security and reasonable prospects for economic and democratic development. The Afghan people at that time were solidly in favor of a 'regime change', having long suffered from the austerity and repressive conditions of the Taliban rule. Foreigners visiting Kabul in 2002 were struck by the welcoming attitude of the people and the strong and pervasive yearning for peace, stability and reconstruction.

It has been a blow of tragic dimensions that, again, the international community failed to act opportunely. Not only was the need for massive follow-up investment in peace and development under-recognized, the American policy decision to pursue, first and foremost, a unilateral, anti- terrorist agenda prevented a more comprehensive, multilateral support strategy. Nation building was explicitly not a primary objective of the intervention. This narrow focus was aided by a restrained United Nations policy ('light footprint') at the time that was at odds with embarking on a major role in putting the country back on track. This combination of US dominance and UN reticence — forcefully pursued in Kabul by the then American Ambassador Khalilzad (of Afghan origin) and UN envoy Brahimi — left other players not only in a marginal role but also with a convenient excuse to shirk greater responsibilities. It basically set the conditions of the fragmentary, uneven and inadequate efforts that were to follow and that created conditions for the defeated Taliban to regroup and

resurge. The marginalization of the UN-role also prevented the international intervention to become a truly global, unchallengeable endeavor instead of a mainly Western undertaking that provided opponents inside and outside Afghanistan a false argument to misrepresent the intervention as quasi- imperialist and anti-Islam.

This basic situation did not change, in fact grew worse, when in 2003 the US shifted its strategic focus to Iraq, further undercutting the international resolve to effectively deal with the Afghan stabilization and reconstruction challenge. Other, mainly Western countries, were urged, through NATO, to fill the gaps but only incrementally so as the US deemed fit: first the Kabul region, subsequently the North and West, the South and finally the Western provinces. It was not before 2007 that the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force was to extend its reach to the whole of the country. Even then the anti- terrorist campaign remained the exclusive responsibility of the separate, US-commanded Coalition Forces. The gradual extension of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) coverage was achieved by assigning lead roles to different NATO member states in various provinces, an approach that obviously was not conducive to unity of purpose and effort. In addition, a division of labor was introduced thematically, with different lead nations for different issues seen as crucial for stabilization such as counter-narcotics (UK), police (Germany), judiciary (Italy), demobilization (Japan) and of course counter-terrorism (US).

In short, instead of a centrally-led, concerted international endeavor to consolidate the military victory in 2001 and engage in massive institutional, infrastructural and economic rehabilitation, a very piecemeal and fragmentary approach was pursued that was bewildering to Afghans and the international community alike and bound to impair the efficiency and effectiveness of the overall intervention.

Equally serious, the fragmentation and incoherence of the international efforts were not helpful to induce the central government, through capacity building and leverage, to become more responsive to people's needs and expectations and deal more decisively and effectively with the many challenges. By working around rather than through the government, at national and provincial levels, the international intervention became overly directed and controlled from multiple outside capitals, which did little to help firm up and expand the government authority and credibility in the eyes of the Afghan people. Even as late as 2008 nearly 70 % of foreign inputs — apart from the huge foreign military expenditures — were allocated and disbursed outside direct government control. This lack of Afghan ownership partially accounted for the weak governance that has been a major if not main contributing factor to the growing popular disenchantment and discontent in the last few years.

Current situation

The international reluctance to act more comprehensively, coherently and commensurately, together with poor governance, created conditions for the Taliban and other so-called Anti-Government Elements to re-emerge. Their insurgent activities exposed and exploited the lack of government authority and, through increasing terrorist attacks, caused fear and insecurity to spread from, initially, the southern and western provinces to Kabul and other regions of the country. As a result, a military no-win situation has evolved in which the international forces although overwhelmingly superior in resources and technology, have become bogged down by hit-and-run tactics of a diffused insurgent movement. The latter could sustain its operations by availing itself of safe havens in Pakistan border areas and fund itself from, among others things, the narcotics trade. This stalemate is, of course, not tenable and erodes the credibility of the international

mission and the Afghan Government alike. It emboldens the insurgents who 'have the time' and undermines the resolve of the foreign forces that 'have the watch'. A considerable reshaping of the mission is needed, for which the time may be opportune now that a new president is about to take office in the US. Obviously, there are limits to changing course mid-way. Many past choices cannot be undone and not all of these have been without success. There have been, for instance, significant advances in the areas of education – especially for girls — health, infrastructure and, albeit very uneven, economic growth. However, in four main, broad areas the need for redefining and refocusing the international mission – which in essence remains a 'noble mission' — seems particularly pertinent:

1. Changing the military–civilian balance

It is obvious, and has been recognized all around for some time, that there is no military solution to the problems and that only a comprehensive approach can bring the desired stability and progress. Yet, a vast discrepancy between military and non-military efforts persists. With due respect to the military, they cannot be expected to bring the necessary, balance on their own account. Their reconstruction efforts through Provincial Reconstruction Teams can only be a temporary option where security conditions do not permit civilian organizations, together with the Government, to engage in durable development programs. UN, EU and bilateral agencies will have to enlarge their role significantly to match the military efforts. So, while the case for a surge in military deployment can be made — if well directed and positioned — the greater need is for a 'civilian surge' in order to bring crucial improvements in development and governance. The overriding priority here is to restore the rule of law to protect the people against lawlessness and abuse of power. Accelerated build-up of Afghan law enforcement capacity — especially the police and judiciary — is of the essence. As a telling failure to learn lessons from other, earlier (post-)conflict situations, it was not before 2007 that the urgency of law enforcement through massive investments in domestic police and judiciary was taken up in earnest.

2. Improve coordination and Afghan ownership

The incoherence of numerous, separate bilateral activities, unevenly spread over the country with little say by the Afghan government, must be addressed. The international presence needs more central coordination and guidance ('multilateralisation'), while the Afghan 'ownership' must be greatly enhanced ('Afghanisation'). The EU, NATO and especially the UN need to expand and synchronize their roles in a mutually reinforcing manner. Special institutional arrangements may be required that will also allow for much more and better coordination with the Afghan authorities. The Afghans should be given a far greater say in the planning and execution of policies in all areas, including security. They should be allowed and enabled to take more charge and, in public communication, be presented and seen as such. Exogenous, remote control over programs and activities has no durable effect: 'on ne developpe pas, on se developpe'. This is true for the military as well. Efforts to enhance the size, capabilities and role of the Afghan National Army should be accelerated to the extent possible. Not only are Afghan soldiers more acceptable and credible in the enforcement of military security on the ground, their training and deployment costs are a fraction of what it takes to maintain a foreign soldier on Afghan soil.

3. Political reconciliation

Lately, there has been increasing talk of 'speaking to the enemy'. This seems only natural in the Afghan

context and long history of 'shuras' and 'jirgas' that aim at compromise and consensus. Equating the basically national, Afghan Taliban with the international, terrorist Al-Qaeda organization is not helpful to recognize the difference between the truly extremist, jihadist elements in the insurgent movement and all those who joined the ranks for a variety of reasons, ranging from grievances against bad governance, economic hardship, misguidance or sheer opportunism. In retrospect, it has probably been a serious misjudgment not to have the Taliban — even by proxy — participate in the early talks about Afghanistan's future back in 2001/2002. Their exclusion from any role in the new Afghanistan has added to their militancy and, over the years, forged their ties to the international terrorist network. They are, however, a segment of the Afghan population and as such cannot be denied a role in Afghan society. Many potential intermediaries, including former Taliban functionaries, have indicated that opportunities for talks exist — at various levels — with a view to re-integrate the bulk of the insurgents back into mainstream Afghan development, on the condition of course that the Constitution be recognized and violence renounced. Political participation in the forthcoming elections in 2009 might be a concrete option for these groups to re- surface as a legitimate movement in the new, pluriform democracy.

4. Regional approach

For too long the Afghan conflict has been viewed as purely a local problem. In fact, it is very much a part of a regional setting where neighboring countries have a large stake in the outcome. This is of course especially true for Pakistan, in the frontier regions of which the Taliban and other AGE groups have been able to establish centers for recruitment, training, recovery and strategic guidance and from where many of their operations are launched. As long as this situation lasts, it will be very hard to put an end to the attacks. The recent rise of a Pakistani Taliban has further complicated this situation. Hopefully, stronger efforts by the new, democratic government of Pakistan supported by far greater efforts by international partners to bring meaningful development to these long neglected areas in Pakistan, may help to address this anomalous situation and bring greater control and stability. Only then 'the swamp can be drained' and the extremist elements marginalized and eliminated. Other neighboring countries should also be encouraged to play a greater, helpful role in bringing stability. Iran with its inherent opposition to Sunni extremism, is potentially a helpful ally and might be persuaded to play a more supportive role. So are the Central-Asian countries, some of which have their own internal problems with Islamist extremism. The growing prominence of Kazakhstan in this region could be put to good use, especially in 2010 when its political stature and influence will be enhanced by its Chairmanship of the OSCE. It is in keeping with its advocacy of 'dialogue between civilizations' that it should take an active interest in promoting stability in Afghanistan. Besides being politically desirable, this would also serve the economic interest of the region since a peaceful, stable Afghanistan would open new and vast prospects for interregional trade in energy and commodities. Kazakhstan could consider an initiative in convening a top level regional meeting to further regional cooperation in support of Afghan peace and stability.

In conclusion, there are definite prospects to adjust the international response to the Afghan conflict and bring what is basically a 'noble mission' to its necessary, successful conclusion — for the benefit of, first of all, the long- suffering Afghan population, but also in the interest of the region and the world at large.

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Netherlands Helsinki Committee
Het Nutshuis
Riviervismarkt 4
2513 AM The Hague
The Netherlands

www.nhc.nl