

Afghanistan's Clouded Future

presented by Robert P. Finn

The attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001 resulted in the formation of an international coalition to remove the Taliban and al-Qaeda organizations that had taken Afghanistan captive and turned it into a launching vessel for international terrorism. Military forces from over 50 different nations joined together in an ongoing war against international terrorism. In addition, the international community combined in a unique endeavor to help Afghanistan rebuild and recover from 23 years of war that had devastated the country. But it is important to remember that, prior to those years of war and still now, seven years later, Afghanistan is one of the poorest countries of the world with some of the lowest basic indicators, a country recently described by the Brookings Institution as one of the world's four failed states. The problems of Afghanistan existed long before the devastation of the last three decades. Media coverage has graphically recorded the problems that still beset Afghanistan, but often skips over the long history of poverty and lack of development in a land where reconstruction is often really another name for construction. Unless that changes and Afghanistan can become secure and develop a self-sustaining economy, it will remain a world problem.

We all know the Taliban and al-Qaeda destroyed the ancient statues of the Buddha that had graced the valley of Bamiyan for some 1400 years. What few people know is that the Taliban and al-Qaeda went for sixty miles through the valley, and up the mountain sides to ten thousand feet, destroyed every single building they could find, killing thousands of people. The Shia inhabitants of the valley were, in their belief, heretics who should be destroyed. Bamiyan, a valley with over one hundred thousand inhabitants, has never had electricity. But now, under Afghanistan's first lady governor, Bamiyan is developing slowly, with its first electric generator and the first paved road in a

province the size of Connecticut now being built. The New Zealand soldiers who are stationed in Bamiyan have not fired a shot in four years, and like 17 other provinces in Afghanistan, opium is not grown in Bamiyan. At the same time, the people who live there complain that they do not receive assistance because they do not cause trouble.

This is not unusual in Afghanistan, a country where contradictions are part of everyday life. The basic infrastructures of electricity, roads and water are often not present and in many cases, have never been present. When there are roads, even main roads, years of war reduced them to the level of tracks. Some 3500 miles of roads have now been repaired. In 2002, it took more than 24 hours to drive from Kabul to Kandahar. After the U.S.-led reconstruction of the road, that time dropped to four and a half hours, but now security concerns make travel problematic. The national police trained to help protect the roads have become particular targets of the Taliban. Roads are one main key to improving the situation in Afghanistan. They bring security, access to market and access to services, governmental, medical and educational.

When they do not exist, the Taliban can easily operate in the unbelievably rugged terrain that is their home. In the provinces, one can jog faster than vehicles can move, and vehicles moving slowly through the dusty landscape are visible from miles away. Lack of roads means lack of access, so that the government, any government cannot get to much of the country. One of the reasons for the rise of regional power bases run by warlords, including those affiliated to the Taliban, is a response to the need for some security in an anarchic world where the central authority cannot reach. Feudalism developed in Western Europe as a response to the breakdown of the security and authority that had come with the road system of the Roman Empire. The absence of the central government in rural areas is a major complaint of Afghans. Lack of government presence means people turn to the Taliban both for protection and

for employment. Security, employment and government are the three main needs of Afghanistan .

The Taliban know that improvements in transportation bring improvements in security, and see the roads being built throughout Afghanistan , as tangible threats to their program to bring down the Karzai government and drive foreigners out of Afghanistan . For this reason they have targeted not only the roads and policemen, but road workers as well, having already succeeded in driving most foreign assistance workers out of south-east Afghanistan . They know that development and reconstruction threaten them physically and ideologically.

The problem of reconstruction in Afghanistan has several important factors that interface with one another. First, the amount of assistance per capita in Afghanistan has simply not been sufficient. Consistently, Afghanistan has been pledged half of what it requested, and actually received half of that. In addition, pledges are often given over long periods of time. In the first two years after intervention, Afghanistan received a little over fifty dollars per capita from the international community. In contrast, Bosnia received over fourteen hundred dollars per capita, and Rwanda some one hundred and eighty eight. If you look at the map, you can see the size of Afghanistan alone would make development more expensive than in little Bosnia or Rwanda , leaving aside the physical difficulties.. The USG has dramatically increased its financial commitment for this year, but as in both Iraq and Pakistan , some 90 percent of the funding is for military and security concerns.

One success indicator in Afghanistan that also has created problems is education. In 2002, the first school year after the Taliban were driven out of power, 1.8 million children were predicted, but 3 million showed up at school. Now, 6.2 million children are in school, in buildings that are often little more than roofless shells or mats on the ground. Girls attend in large numbers nationwide. Despite press stories that might make one believe that they are not

going back to school, 35 percent of students nationwide are girls. The Taliban have destroyed hundreds of schools, killed teachers and even students.

The people of Afghanistan want development, want government and want security. They have made it very clear to the international community that the Taliban were able to take over because they provided the promise of security, and at first the reality as well. Their later ideological excesses alienated the population and made them hated. However, the Taliban collapse saw the return of many of the same people who had been ruling the country before, and whose misuse of power had opened the way for the Taliban. They joined forces with the coalition to drive out the Taliban, and pledged to the international community at Bonn that they had learned their lessons about the use of power. They were brought into the provisional cabinet to make the government ethnically inclusive and President Karzai, termed “Mr. Afghanistan ” by everyone back in 2002, was named provisional President. Once back in office, however, these warlords soon began to exhibit the same behavior that had enabled the Taliban to take over in the first place. The Taliban resurgence in the last two years can be attributed, to a certain degree, to this fact, and to the rising disenchantment with the Kabul government as well, where corruption and nepotism are rampant.

The power of the purse is often the power to rule. At first, the government in Kabul received virtually no revenue from the provinces. Revenue, in Afghanistan , comes mainly from customs collections at the border crossing points. The main warlords were the same people whose provinces sit on the border crossing points, so it is not hard to see where the money went. Gradually, however, the central government began to take charge of the customs offices, and collected several hundred million dollars in each year. Some of the major warlords, such as Ismail Khan of Herat were moved away from the cities where they exercised power, but were then appointed to other appointed to other government positions, in his case as Minister of Energy,

where they still had access to government funds to distribute or award in contracts.

The large amounts of foreign assistance that came to Afghanistan , albeit insufficient, were also mainly distributed by foreigners outside of the purview of the Afghan government. Economy Minister Ahady has noted that up to 85 percent of assistance funds does not go through the Afghan government. The reasons are multiple, including capacity and corruption, but the fact has contributed to the widespread perception that corruption is rampant within and without the government of Afghanistan , as relatives of officeholders organize non-government organizations and obtain contracts from foreigners. Ostentatious living and flagrant abuses of power and privilege by senior officials and their relatives aggravate the issue. President Karzai often seems powerless against them.

Another area of concern is that of governmental capacity. The individuals who took over the government of Afghanistan after 9/11 were mainly inexperienced in government, and often had spent many years living outside of the country. They inherited a bloated, ineffectual bureaucracy that was unpaid, dysfunctional and often imbued with command-economy thinking from the Soviet period. Plans for a civil service academy to train government bureaucrats have not yet been implemented, although a military academy has been functioning since 2005.

Nevertheless, substantial improvements have begun. The Central Bank changed and unified the currency in a process that took six months and was marked by very few complaints of irregularity. The Japanese estimated that they would have needed two years in their highly organized society to do the same thing. Private banks have opened, and the national bank has an electronic payment system.

Major revision of the legislation regarding investments and private property has been made. In spite of their security concerns, foreign investors

are interested in Afghanistan and have committed more than five billion dollars to date. Both Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola are present. However, more work needs to be done in changing attitudes and streamlining procedures if investment is to become a truly significant factor. One problem is the inability of government officials trained in the Soviet period to think of private investment as anything other than as a cash cow for the government or individuals who have power over government decisions, attitudinal problems that have plagued the former states of the Soviet Union as well. As ministries have developed the capacity to run their own affairs and programs, they have had to negotiate with foreign development specialists and international organizations who had been accustomed to run things on their own during the Taliban period and earlier. It is a difficult task to help build capacity at the same time as one has to insure that the actual work gets done, but both the donor community and the Afghans bear responsibility for not having done much better in this regard in the last six years.

Security is the primary concern in Afghanistan . From outside, one gets the impression of some kind of medieval mosaic with warlords on every hilltop and mayhem in between. The reality is rather different, but that does not mean that life is secure for the average Afghan, or that it is getting better. The Taliban have shown that they are capable of striking anywhere in the country, including the heart of Kabul . Suicide bombings, a technique imported from Iraq , have become commonplace, 180 last year. NATO bombings have become another problem, with high numbers of civilian deaths attributed to them. The situation overall is getting worse, with most of the action taking place in the southeast and particularly in the province of Helmand . Each day, hundreds of roadside bombs detonate.

For over thirty years, Afghanistan has been at war. We are now well into the second generation of men who know no other life than that of soldiering. To establish security, they must have new lives. The Japanese-managed

program of disarmament and demobilization was effective as far as it went, but the thousands of adherents of the warlords and the growing number of young men joining the Taliban for economic reasons attest to the ongoing need for jobs. It is imperative to create an economy that holds the promise of a better life to get soldiers to put down their arms.

A secure Afghanistan needs an army and police that belong to the nation, and not to one side or another. One of President Karzai's problems is that he lacks such a force. The new Afghan army is supposed to reach its goal of 70,000 men next year. Training has been a long and difficult process. Afghan troops are still not able to maintain positions in the field, and there is a serious shortage of officers. When one group of 97 officers finished training in December, a field commander said he had needed 197 officers in November. I am concerned about the ethnic loyalties of these soldiers in the event of internal tensions in Afghanistan not related to the Taliban.

Police should provide everyday security in a country. In Afghanistan, however, the police are often seen as part of the problem rather than part of the solution, with the Interior Ministry, to which they are attached, famous for its corruption and links to drug traders. Fawzia Kofi, the deputy speaker of the Parliament, said that the position of police chief in her northern province of Badakshan sells for \$100,000, and changes hands regularly. Under the lead nation program, Germany was training a new police force in Kabul, but the program was long term and the need was immediate. An international group has now taken over the lead in training police officers and the U.S. is training ordinary policemen as well; now the training has been criticized as being superficial and insufficient. The police have been the particular targets of Taliban attacks, as they are also seen as the visible presence of the Kabul government. In many small towns, a few unpaid, unfed policemen are the only sign of the national government. Over a thousand were killed in the last year.

Security has been deteriorating in Afghanistan . 2007 marked the highest number of casualties since 2001. U.S. forces have lost over a hundred, and the casualty rate is as high or higher than Iraq . Many of those killed were civilians. Some 8000 people were killed in Afghanistan in this fighting in 2007. Another 2000 were killed in incidents unrelated to the war.

President Karzai has been vocal in calling for an end to bombing of targets where civilians are present. Aerial bombing that kills civilians is becoming an important factor in the psychological war for the people of Afghanistan . Mixing with civilians to make them become targets of government action is a common and successful tactic in insurgencies. Suicide bombers are no longer limited to the southeast. A bombing in Baghlan that killed some seventy people including a government minister, the assassination of six elders on their way to prayer in Herat and the attack on the Serena hotel in the heart of Kabul were intentional proofs of the Taliban pledge to bring the war to all of Afghanistan .

Our military alliance in Afghanistan is troubled. NATO allies have been reluctant to commit more troops to Afghanistan . The discussion has spilled into the press. There are indications France , Norway and Poland may increase their commitments to the fighting zone, and Germany has opened the door to sending more troops, but the problem is a serious one that has threatened the sitting government in Canada . The Canadian government has threatened to remove its troops in 2009 unless more NATO forces come to join them. The NATO summit in Bucharest April 2-4 planned to deal with the issue has now invited Vladimir Putin and Afghanistan will become a back burner issue to concerns over a possible new cold war.

A number of nations have limited their soldiers' Afghanistan participation to non-combat roles. This obviously presents difficulties for soldiers on the ground, particularly when countries such as Canada receive a high number of casualties. Whatever the justifiability of the individual reasons nations may have

for these caveats, as they are called, they necessarily impinge on and ultimately threaten the military unity of the forces in Afghanistan . One obviously cannot have a military alliance whose rule is “an attack on one is an attack on all” if some of the soldiers cannot join the fighting.

The border with Pakistan is permeable for the Taliban and al Qaeda, but not for the NATO troops who are fighting them. The tribal areas of Pakistan and the province of Baluchistan provide safe haven for the Taliban and al Qaeda and the roads of Pakistan provide access for war materiel. Many feel that in fact that these areas of Pakistan are the source of the problem rather than just contributing to it. Military strategists agree that one cannot win against an insurgency when they can move freely across an international border and those fighting against them cannot. Pakistan’s President Musharraf is widely accused of playing both sides in his bid to make the U.S. maintain its support– political and fiscal – for him while at the same he relied internally on the support of Islamic parties,. In addition, elements of the Pakistani military, the well-known ISI, act independently of the government when it suits them and have long ties with Islamic fundamentalists. Pakistan ’s recent elections cast into doubt whether Musharraf will be able to maintain his office. Nawaz Sharif, leader of one of the victorious parties, is openly questioning the kind of commitment Pakistan has made to the war on terror, suggesting that talking with rather than fighting the Taliban and al Qaeda might prove a better tactic.

President Karzai also held out an olive branch to the Taliban last fall, offering to go and meet with insurgent leaders if that would help. Some Taliban leaders and many soldiers have accepted the government’s offers of amnesty in the past. A USG plan for concerted economic aid to the Pushtun areas of Pakistan has the goal of perhaps decoupling Pushtuns, or at least some of them, from al Qaeda. Fighting last summer in Wana between Central Asian, mainly Uzbek terrorists and local tribesmen was an indicator that the universalist fundamentalist ideology of al Qaeda may not be what Pushtun

tribesmen see as their future. British and U.S. officials have cautiously endorsed conversations with Taliban leaders. The victory of the secular Awami National Party in Pakistan 's Northwest Frontier Province is another positive indication. In the last few years, the Taliban have systematically eliminated, by murder and other means, the traditional leadership of the Pushtun tribes in the tribal areas of Pakistan alongside the Afghan border who would have been more receptive to reconciliation. In the end, as in any conflict situation, talks will be necessary.

In Kabul itself President Karzai's government has run into trouble from the newly elected Parliament. The United National Movement, an opposition movement in the Parliament led by Speaker Yunus Qanooni, who came second in the Presidential elections, has been active in working against Karzai and would like to replace the current government with a parliamentary regime, thus sidestepping Karzai. Many complain that members of the UNO are mainly former warlords and others whose goal is mainly to protect themselves and aggrandize their own power. Nationwide, Afghans still support the Karzai government and the war against terror, and still want foreign troops in their country, but their patience is not endless.

One factor which does not emerge clearly in the international reporting on Afghanistan , is that, in spite of the many divisions and ongoing violence, there is continuous communication among and between all of the participants. The history of Afghanistan is a history of changing alliances in response to the need to survive, and the current situation mirrors that need. But it is a history in which the question of national unity was never raised. There has been no idea of secession in Afghanistan , only of ruling the whole show. The international community needs to reassure the Afghans that it will be there to help them, that it will not disappear again and leave them to fight among themselves, that its commitment is determined and lasting. One reason for the ability of the warlords to stay in power and for the Taliban revival is that people are searching for a security that will endure when the foreigners leave.

Along with governance, Afghanistan needs a legal economy, one that is not propped up by opium. Once an exporter of food, it is now an exporter of opium, a crop worth several billion dollars a year. Production has increased dramatically, now producing 93 percent of world consumption. There is a widespread conviction that many figures in the government are directly involved, and eradication and prevention measures have so far been totally inadequate. Barnett Rubin described the current prevention program as a failure, and the drug production has actually risen 14 percent this past year. Experience in other countries show that dedicated commitment to alternate crops and income development along with a strict policy of no tolerance can stop narcotics production. In fact, a number of provinces have stopped production. But many already consider Afghanistan to be a narco-Mafia state.

Much has been accomplished in Afghanistan , particularly in light of the situation that actually existed in the country in September of 2001. The growth rate is phenomenal, and incomes have nearly trebled. There is new construction all over Afghanistan , and not just in the cities. Over one million Afghans now have cell phones, compared to a theoretical 38,000 landlines in 2002. Phones are so widespread the the Taliban have started destroying the cell phone signal towers after the phone companies refused to shut down at night so the the Taliban could have free movement. Radical changes have been made to everyday life.

Nearly sixty percent of people now have access to some kind of health care, and infant mortality has dropped twenty percent. But that means one in five children die before the age of five instead of one in four. The incomes have trebled, but Afghanistan is still one of the poorest countries in the world. The percentages are great, but the reality is horrifying. The international community spends over \$100 million per year on development in Afghanistan . That's only about three dollars per capita. As Sen, Biden noted at CFR recently, we've spent

in six years on Afghan development what we spend in three weeks in military operations in Iraq .

The war on Iraq has had a serious effect on Afghanistan from many different aspects. Resources and personnel were redirected, although absolute figures of assistance for Afghanistan continued to rise. In addition, and more importantly, attention was refocused on Iraq and taken away from Afghanistan . The war in Afghanistan , a war under the auspices of the UN, became confused in many minds with the war in Iraq . In military terms, Afghanistan has seen the import of techniques, such as suicide bombers and personnel, in the form of al Qaeda fighters. The failure to win the war in Iraq has only heartened AlQaeda in Afghanistan . In spite of many successes, and the ongoing support of the Afghan people, we cannot say that the war in Afghanistan has been won, or even that victory is in sight. Military and economic investment in Afghanistan will be needed for years to come, and not single-digit years.

Events in Afghanistan do not take place in a vacuum. Everyone is now aware of the importance Pakistan plays in Afghanistan . There have been many claims from Afghans, that Pakistan in its various manifestations is actively working to prevent the building of stability in Afghanistan . Pakistan has its own fears of attack from India and of a lack of strategic depth in a country which is only 85 miles wide at one point. India , for its part, has opened a number of consulates in Afghanistan which feed Pakistani fears, and is cooperating with Iran to build transportation lines that would bypass Pakistan . As it now stands, Afghanistan 's trade with Pakistan is a substantial two billion dollars a year. Pakistanis are also concerned by India 's first base abroad, in Afghanistan 's northern neighbor, Tajikistan .

Afghanistan 's relations with Iran are also multifaceted. Iran has been host to more than a million Afghan refugees, but now it is expelling them. It threw out 360 thousand last year. Iran played a cooperative role in the initial phases of the war against the Taliban. In addition, more than 3000 Iranian

soldiers and policemen have been killed in the last decade in the war against drugs. Iran has also played a role in destabilizing Afghanistan through efforts of the Revolutionary guards in the hinterlands. U.S. military officials have spoken out several times about the presence of Iranian weapons in the hands of the Taliban, and even witnessed the trucks driving across from Iran . Iranian officials have implied strongly that U.S. forces in Afghanistan would come under attack if hostilities broke out between the U.S. and Iran . Iran is officially a good neighbor of Afghanistan , a position which President Karzai has vocally maintained.

Afghanistan 's northern neighbors stand to benefit greatly when security and transport links are sufficient to enable passage through Afghanistan to the sea. Central Asian goods could reach the sea at Karachi in eighteen hours instead of a journey of over a week to European ports. Maritime transport is also significantly cheaper. The Indian/Iranian port being built at Charbahar with a link to the Afghan ring road is an example of active engagement in this field. Psychologically, the ability to access the outside other than through Russia could be of enormous significance for the landlocked Central Asian countries. Energy links are already being revitalized and extended.

China is also aware of this and is also improving its land links with Central Asia and directly with Afghanistan through the Wakhan Corridor which gives the the two countries a short common border. The Chinese chief of staff visited Kabul in the fall to speak about security cooperation, and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, begun by China , has as a main concern security threats emanating from Afghanistan . From the vantage of the north, Afghanistan has been the source of two major shocks, the defeat of the Soviet Union and the invasion of Afghanistan led by the United States . All of the former Soviet Central Asian countries are concerned about drugs and terrorism from Afghanistan , and the U.S. presence there has made them nervous about the future and led to a renewal of their ties with oil-rich Russia . The changes

in the relations between Uzbekistan and Russia are the clearest case, with the U.S. forced to give up its base at Karshi Khanabad after it criticized the Uzbek government for human rights abuses. There are still ties between the Afghan warlords opposed to the Taliban and their friends to the north. The Russian ambassador in Kabul recently said that NATO should evaluate why it is there and that Russia threatened that Russia would react if it turned out that NATO was there for more than the war on terror. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization has made several calls for the U.S. to set up a timetable for leaving the region. Thus, Afghanistan has become both a key player as well as part of the chessboard for the new Great Game that is being played in this increasingly important part of the world.

The question everyone wants to know is; what's going to happen? How will it end? There is no single answer to those questions, and many of the possibilities are not good. The transition to a democratically elected government and a free market economy has been much more difficult than many expected. The figures who were in power before are still active players and increasingly opposed to President Karzai. The new government has adopted a more Islamic tone than many in the west thought it would. Legal reform is one of the more visible failures of the international effort to help Afghanistan, a country that uses traditional, Sharia and legislated forms of law at the same time.

The two key factors that make the current situation unacceptable are failure to produce security and the failure to produce visible development. Expectations were no doubt too high, and the development of Afghanistan will take several decades more even if the commitment does not wane. The sadly diminished moral authority of the United States coupled with the rising number of civilian and military casualties have affected commitment to a difficult struggle. Most Afghans however, demonstrably do not want a return to what

they had before. The UN thinks only about 20 percent of Afghans are sympathetic to the Taliban.

What will eventually emerge in Afghanistan is likely to be a state that reflects the ethnic and social divisions of a country that is still not unitary. The ancient divides of tribes and geography will continue to serve as defining parameters of much what transpires. The centralized governmental system forecast in the constitution will only be partially implemented. Problems of social and legal justice will be resolved by a mix of methods. Governance will not be functional until the government itself has trained officials who can both do their job and are honest and who receive a living wage. The basic standards of life must be raised. Currently, life expectancy in Afghanistan is 43, meaning a good twenty years of productive activity from each person are lost to the nation. Health, education and the status of women have a very long way to go before they get to even minimally acceptable standards.

Afghanistan is not a litmus test of just the United States ; it is one for the whole world community, which united in resolution to rescue that nation from terrorism. The problems of governance, waging war and power relationships between Afghanistan and the world community are those on which the success or failure of Afghanistan and the international community will depend. A clear military victory in Afghanistan is less likely than a gradual diminution of the threat. The economic development of Afghanistan to self-sustaining status is both possible and measurable. The ability of the government of Afghanistan to be master of its own house must develop and be supported, not supplanted, by the international community.

The fighting in Afghanistan is in its seventh year, longer than World War II. The people of Afghanistan still show in polls that they want the international coalition to succeed and to have a free democratic society, one that is economically sustainable. Much has been done in Afghanistan , but clearly not enough, and there have been mistakes, missed opportunities and major

inefficiencies. The war in Iraq has obviously been a distracting factor, and one that has caused material and moral damage to the operations in Afghanistan . In 2003 the assumption was that Afghanistan was moving swiftly along the right path. That assumption is no longer valid, and the future of Afghanistan is clouded by problems. The goal remains the same, and is as important as it was when the world community resolved to take action: to stop al Qaeda from using Afghanistan as its base and to free that country from a terrorist regime. The choice is not whether to be in Afghanistan , but how to win those goals.