

Comprehensive Action Plan for Afghanistan January 2009

Afghanistan, once thought of as the “good war,” is on the brink of being lost. But the failure of the US and international effort there is not a foregone conclusion. A thoughtful, wide-ranging shift in strategy on the part of the Obama Administration can still avert Afghanistan’s likely fate as an irrevocable – and dangerous – failed state, with ominous implications for the region and the rest of the world.

Such a shift ought to include the following components.

I. The concept

The United States should redefine its objectives in favor of the Afghan *people*, not the Afghan government. In a counter-insurgency, the people are the proverbial prize. It is only by supporting the Afghan people – not abusive powerbrokers – in their effort to reconstitute their social, economic, institutional, and cultural fabric, that stability in Afghanistan can be achieved, and the country be durably denied as a sanctuary for terrorists.

But divergent analyses of Afghan people’s situation and desires carry profoundly different policy implications. One school of thought, championed especially in the UK and by some US academics, maintains that Afghanistan is fundamentally a tribal society, which has never been governed from the center, and cannot be. Corollaries of this thesis include the notion that “functional corruption” is the norm, and that Pashtuns’ cultural backwardness makes them innately permeable to Taliban ideology.

The other analysis, more closely attuned to what the Afghan population has been saying since 2001, highlights the historical inaccuracy of this vision. For much of the past century, and certainly within living memory (1950s-1979), Afghanistan was governed from Kabul by a well-constituted and legitimate authority, which enjoyed monopoly of the use of force, wielded sophisticated judicial processes, both governmental and traditional, and fostered cultural dynamism and expanding civil liberties.

This analysis sees tribal forms of social organization as a kind of dual citizenship – complementary to, not exclusive of, national identity and allegiance. Tribal social structures have come to the fore in moments of acute crisis, when the state itself was under attack (eg. by the British Empire, the USSR).

The Afghan population harks back to the period of functioning central authority with nostalgia, and sees excessive tribalism as an aberration – an aberration that grew so extreme in the early 1990s that even the Taliban seemed preferable. In other words, southern Afghans’ acquiescence to the Taliban in 1994 was not due to their adherence to extremist ideology, but

rather to their acute suffering at the hands of the predatory warlords who dominated the landscape in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal.

Evidence for this view is that in Kandahar – the Taliban’s very heartland – the demise of that regime in 2001 was greeted with universal joy and enthusiasm for the nascent Karzai administration and international presence in Afghanistan. Afghans, even the notoriously conservative southern Pashtuns, sent their girls to school in droves, and looked to President Karzai and the United States to help them build responsible and responsive government structures *not* tainted by extremist ideology.

Instead, obsessed by a counter-terrorism agenda, the United States re-empowered the warlords that the population had repudiated in the early 1990s, for use as proxies in the hunt for al-Qaeda. It is because the US and its allies in NATO and the UN have consistently backed these men with treasure and weaponry and moral support, demanding no accounts in return, that southern and eastern Afghanistan has once again become permeable – reluctantly – to the Taliban. For, as painful as the extremists’ exactions are, they are seen as no more painful than the behavior of the government officials we back.

II. Governance

And so, the most critical element of a new approach to Afghanistan must be an urgent focus on good governance. For, the above analysis indicates a paradox. While international officials, especially in the UN, tout the Afghan government as “legitimate” and “democratically elected,” Afghans experience the opposite. They say that the United States imposed the current government officials upon them. And that it is therefore our responsibility to provide some means of recourse against their depredations.

Immediate initiatives should include:

- **Civilian mentoring.** One of the most successful international programs in Afghanistan has been the embedded mentoring of the Afghan National Army by US and other NATO military officers. In the space of three years, this effort has transformed the army into the most respected branch of Afghan government. That “best practice” – and a similar experience implemented by UNDP in the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development – should be rapidly expanded to the Afghan National Police, and emulated on the civilian side.

The United States and its NATO allies should provide trained mentors for government officials, not just at the ministerial level in Kabul, but especially in the provinces and municipalities, where Afghan people experience their government. These mentors, who must be experienced administrators, while canny and flexible of spirit, should not make decisions in place of the Afghans, but rather engage in true capacity-building, by helping and pressuring local officials on a day-to-

day and case-by-case basis to make decisions that favor the interests of the citizens.

Such a program would fit with Pres. Obama's call to public service, and also with the urgent need to re-burnish relations between the United States and its NATO partners. While continuing to request additional combat troops where possible, the Obama Administration could display understanding of the Allies' constitutional and capacity constraints, and appeal to their strengths and the preference of their populations for civilian action.

- **Committees for Redress.** The political system built under international tutelage since the fall of the Taliban is bereft of effective checks and balances. Temporary, ad hoc mechanisms must be created to provide that function, while more robust and independent institutions develop. Every province or at least every regional command zone should have a joint committee for redress of grievances – a kind of ombudsman committee – made up of representatives from the battle group and PRT, the key donor agency, the lead country political advisor or diplomatic representative, an international law enforcement professional, and three to five Afghans of stature whose integrity and courage are prized by the community. This committee should have a small, dedicated team of police officers, who will be trained in white-collar investigations. Its function would be to collect and vet complaints of major government abuse, including but not limited to abuse in the distribution of development inputs. Grievances determined to be well-grounded should be brought to the offending officials' superior, eg. the governor, with a requirement that the wrong be redressed. The ombudsman committee must be responsible for follow-up, to the highest levels of the Afghan government if necessary.
- **Outreach to traditional structures.** Afghan democracy – a consensus-building model – functions most effectively on the local level. International actors must reach out more effectively to local tribal structures. But the intent should not be to substitute these structures for government institutions (eg., by arming them, for the police); rather it should be to enlist their wisdom and proximity to the population to contribute to a checks and balances role.
- **More effective use of existing partnering and mentoring relationships to achieve anticorruption effects.** Expanding partnering, not just with the ANA, but with the Afghan Border Police and Highway Police, provides an opportunity to exercise oversight. ABP together with its international mentors and partners could increase visibility over the customs department, or shut down the multiple illegal police tolls on major roads.
- **Pay raises:** In order to be materially able to refrain from corruption, civil servants need to be paid a living wage. Current salaries do not allow their recipients to buy an entire gunny sack of flour, of which a

normal Afghan family of 8-10 people consumes two to three per month. Therefore the salaries of Afghan civil servants must be doubled at least, to reach some \$250/month. Money for this is abundantly available in revenues from customs, which are currently being siphoned off to line the pockets of regional strongmen. So the “accountability offensive” should be directed first at customs, with the increased revenue being earmarked for increasing civil servants’ salaries.

Corruption is too important an issue to be left to the Afghan government – the prime offender – alone. The international community can no longer be taken in by bogus government-fostered “anti-corruption” initiatives, such as an anti-corruption office run by a man who has done Federal time for trying to sell cocaine to the DEA, or an “Independent Directorate of Local Governance” run by a member of President Karzai’s tribe, who spends part of each day closeted with the president.

III. Security

If the US objective is redefined as above – and if the prize in any counter-insurgency is indeed the people – then certain precepts must guide security operations.

- **Do no harm.** Despite orders from ISAF HQ, there are still too many escalation of force incidents, or indirect fire, or uses of air assets, in which Afghan civilians are killed. Officers must start considering a rule of thumb: every civilian killed results in 3-5 new Taliban. This calculus may make them realize that it is usually preferable not to engage Taliban at all than to engage them at the price of civilian lives. When civilians are killed, the officer responsible must take personal responsibility, and where possible, engage with the families of the victims.

Similarly, property damage is still treated in too cavalier a fashion. Afghanistan is one of the most poverty-stricken countries on earth. When military units damage orchard walls, knock over fruit trees, or land helicopters in wheat fields, the economic impact for the families involved can be devastating. A voucher system should be devised that would allow victims of property damage to quickly and safely claim compensation.

- **Protect the people.** The bulk of incoming US military assets should be deployed in ways that benefit large swathes of the Afghan population.

Small, mobile and lethally effective Special Forces teams are the units that should be assigned to the difficult fighting against seasoned guerrillas on steep terrain on the eastern edges of RC(E), especially in Kunar Province, and the eastern slopes of Paktika, Khost, and Paktia Provinces. SOF have to date proven themselves too prone to call in air strikes when they are engaged, and so should not be deployed in populated areas.

Moreover, conventional infantry units operating out of fixed bases in peripheral provinces are targets of opportunity, their competitive advantages in intelligence and firepower effectively cancelled out. Or they remain effectively pinned to their outposts, engaged in a sterile, indirect firefight across the border. Those units should be redeployed to areas and tasks of greater benefit to the Afghan people. First among those is the durable reopening of Highway One to civilian and commercial traffic. Second is the protection of vulnerable civilians from intimidation and pressure by armed insurgents. The US should expand its basing of units in some towns and villages, ideally in partnership with the ANSF.

IV. Diplomacy

The government of Pakistan has proven to be a powerful force for instability in south Asia. Overwhelming evidence indicates that since the fall of the Taliban, Pakistani officials have not just been turning a blind eye to the re-constitution of the fundamentalist militia, they have been actively orchestrating it.

Currently, the government of Pakistan is bifurcated, engaged in a struggle against itself. On the one side is the military, which for long periods has actually run the state and which is deeply enmeshed in all aspects of Pakistani life. On the other side is the new and still fractured civilian authority, which came to power in the wake of the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, and thanks to the dynamism of creative and tenacious civil society opposition to the Musharraf regime.

The military will not relinquish its domination of Pakistan's government and much of its economy easily. There are indications that it is actually manufacturing threats - such as helping mastermind the Mumbai terrorist bombings so as to provoke an Indian reaction - to serve as a rationale for its continued hold on de facto power.

US policy should take these dynamics into account by:

➤ **Tempering its support of the Pakistani military, and becoming much more attuned to the duplicitous behavior of that institution.**

It is not really fair to ask our NATO allies to deploy in the most dangerous part of Afghanistan, when US tax dollars in the form of military aid to Pakistan are almost certainly paying for the bullets and explosives that are killing their young men and women.

\$1 billion/year in military aid to Pakistan should be reduced and carefully monitored to ensure that it is not in fact financing the very insurgency it is supposed to combat.

Pakistani military operations against Taliban in the border provinces should not be taken entirely at face value. Careful study must

determine whether they are aimed only at Taliban operating inside Pakistan, or against militants fighting in Afghanistan as well.

The Pakistani military must be asked to take effective action against the leadership of a major part of the Taliban movement, commonly known as the Quetta *Shura*, which currently operates with impunity out of the capital of Baluchistan Province. If this is not done in a timely fashion, the US should consider targeted military action, just as it has been willing to do against al-Qaeda figures.

Until the Pakistani army is credibly seen to oppose *jihadism*, it should not be the beneficiary of sophisticated US weaponry.

➤ **Redoubling its support for the civilian government and its initiatives in favor of development and institution-building.**

In particular, US development assets should be earmarked for the border provinces, to support healthcare, secular education, and economic development, as well as a process of bringing those regions into the fold of mainstream Pakistani government authority.

➤ **Requesting greater cooperation from Pakistan in cross-border issues not directly linked to counter-terrorism.** For example, US diplomats should pressure the Pakistani government to remove the practical obstacles placed in the way of Afghan goods transiting through the country to markets in India and beyond.

V. Development

When Afghans think of “development,” they think of factories. US aid dollars should be redeployed to better support the productive, job-creating, private sector.

➤ **Infrastructure improvements** should be aimed at promoting economic activity. For example, the industrial zones in the six major cities should each be equipped with a dedicated 1-5 megawatt solar electric array to power factories located there.

Such infrastructure improvements should be launched in as labor-intensive a way as possible, so as to absorb manpower that is currently being hired by the insurgency. A kind of Civilian Conservation Corps could be founded, whose members would address some of the grave residual infrastructure problems, such as the electricity distribution systems in all the major cities. (All the wires need to be restrung.) Members of this corps would thus receive precious on-the-job training, and gain a sense of esprit de corps and a feeling of pride and “ownership” in the new Afghanistan. This initiative should also be supported with a public relations campaign, billboards extolling the efforts of the “Soldiers of Peace.”

- **Fostering Afghan manufacturing.** We should not expect sensibly risk-averse private investors to wade into an active theater of war. International development resources must be applied to vitalizing the private sector. Supported manufacturing should focus on labor-intensive, high-end artisanal products for export, and objects of local necessity for the domestic market. These investments should be supported by a pervasive “buy Afghan” advertising campaign.
- **Ending counterproductive policies on the part of the Afghan government.** The Afghan government must revise laws and regulations that penalize Afghan economic activity, such as the customs tariffs and official pricing scheme, which favor the import of manufactured goods over local production, and regulations imposing onerous reporting requirements on Afghan manufacturers and absurd fines in case of delay.

The Afghan government – if necessary through effective use of partnering/mentoring relationships – must be induced to crack down on the smuggling of precious raw materials, such as kromite, to Pakistan.

- **Reinforcing best practices.** The National Solidarity Program, though somewhat uneven in its implementation, is nevertheless widely seen as the most successful large-scale development program deployed in Afghanistan. The Community Development Councils it created and mentored should be used as the platform for delivering other development resources, such as USAID funding and even CERP money.
- **Revitalizing the institutional culture at USAID,** to improve on the agency’s current bureaucratic immobility. USAID officials must be encouraged to be more proactive and flexible, and willing to do the extra work entailed in supporting smaller projects, rather than giving money away in multi-million dollar chunks to private contractors that absorb such a high proportion of our “development” dollars.

VI. Opium

The opium problem is an economic one, and should be addressed as such, and not as a noxious weed infestation. Afghans grow opium because, for a variety of reasons, they are structurally forced into it by economic realities. Those realities need to be addressed.

- **Access to credit** should be dramatically increased, especially in rural areas. That credit should not be limited to business uses, but should also be available for major household events such as the marriage of a son.
- **Financial support for licit agriculture.** Direct financial assistance should be offered to Afghan farmers to help them grow something

that is *not* opium. Contract farming of products for which there is a known international market is one among several tools that should be wielded simultaneously. Another example: a massive re-treeing effort could be launched, via private smallholders, who should be offered fruit tree saplings, and should be paid the amount of money they would earn from the produce of the mature trees *for the first five years*, while the trees are growing. Fruit brings in significantly more revenue to farmers than opium, but the vast majority of Afghan landowners cannot afford to take large portions of their land effectively out of production for several years. Trees are a better alternative to opium than annual crops such as grain, as opium cannot grow under mature trees, and farmers would be loath to dig them up once they are producing.

In the north and east, where rainfall permits the growth of trees in the wild, fast-growing lumber, cedar for essential oil, and other varieties could be planted and tended in a cooperative fashion.

Water-conservative irrigation methods should be taught to those farmers receiving saplings. Solar powered water pumps could be distributed.

Development officials should act as sales representatives for inserting lucrative Afghan products – such as pine nuts – into the international market.

- **Agribusiness:** Concerted effort should be applied to the improvement of processing and packaging of Afghan fruit and dried fruit, so it can meet Western phyto-sanitary standards. Afghanistan currently lacks even the laboratory necessary to test its products. Such a laboratory should be powered by a stand-alone solar generator.

Development dollars should be spent on small-to-medium sized agro-processing businesses: collection dairies for the local market, fruit juice plants for the local market, fruit juice and jam plants for the international market, extract plants (licorice, pomegranate seed) for the international market, seed oil plants for the local and international market, etc.

Farmers should be encouraged to begin using organic processes so they can capture higher prices, and should be supported economically during the initial two-to-three year certification phase.

- **Rethinking eradication.** In line with new authorities agreed upon by NATO, interdiction efforts should be aimed not at growers, but at traffickers and profiteers, even when they hold government positions. A few patient and determined well-placed ambushes on roads linking Urozgan and Kandahar Provinces, for example, could net several thousand kilos of opium paste in a single month.