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“Afghanistan: Challenges Ahead”

The Taliban began gaining ground in 1994. The cooperative ties between the Taliban and Al-Qaeda are now well known, but it is very interesting that the Taliban was initially welcomed by the US because of its expectations that the Taliban would stabilize the situation in Afghanistan. For example, the US petroleum company UNOCAL had drawn up plans to lay a pipeline in Afghanistan once the Taliban had achieved stability in the country. However, the murder of an Iranian diplomat, the closing of schools, the restriction of women's rights, and the development of a collaborative relationship with Al Qaeda steadily brought to light the true nature of the Taliban.

The 9/11 attacks in 2001 became a major turning point for Afghanistan. In “Operation Enduring Freedom,” a multinational coalition led by the US and the UK launched an attack on Afghanistan with the aim of destroying the Taliban and Al-Qaeda. The short-term goals of this operation were securing air superiority and conducting ground operations, while its long-term aims were the overthrow of the Taliban regime and the establishment of a new government, the destruction of Al-Qaeda, and a halt to poppy cultivation and narcotics trafficking. Aimed at neutralizing the enemy on “fronts,” however, this multinational military operation proved unable to completely neutralize the tactical activities of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, who primarily fought a point-target guerilla war. Despite the war having lasted eight years, Osama bin Laden is still on the run, Al-Qaeda has not been completely destroyed, the situation in Afghanistan remains unstable and poppy cultivation has risen sharply.

The late Ahmad Shah Massoud, commander of the Northern Alliance, once told me that the principal reason for instability in Afghanistan was the fight for control over poppy cultivation and narcotics trafficking. The 200-ton poppy harvest of 2001 grew to 9000 tons by 2009 and, dovetailing with this, the situation in Afghanistan has become more unstable. The resurgence of the Taliban has become a concern of late, and among the reasons for this resurgence are spillover effects from Iraq, the lack of credibility among the Afghan people of NATO and ISAF forces, the reaction against occupation, the Pakistan issue, narcotics trafficking, and government corruption and inefficiency. In March of this year, US President

Obama announced a new Afghanistan policy aimed at improving circumstances in the country by deploying more US forces to Afghanistan and bolstering the Afghan army/police. Creating a linkage between Afghanistan and Pakistan has become a primary facet of this policy.

A presidential election is currently underway in Afghanistan, and dialogue with the Taliban has frequently been brought up as a matter to be addressed following the reelection of President Karzai. Karzai has declared recognition of the present constitution to be a precondition for negotiations with the Taliban leader Mullah Omar, while at the same time Omar has demanded withdrawal of foreign military forces as a prerequisite for talks with Karzai. It is manifestly apparent that the two are talking at cross purposes. Garnering attention recently, therefore, has been dialogue with the moderate Taliban. However, I see the moderate Taliban as an "illusion." As you know, the Taliban came about with the support of Pakistan (and especially its Inter-Services Intelligence), a legacy that continues to this day. If the moderate Taliban were to emerge into the limelight, one would have to suspect the possibility of some form of accord between Pakistan's ISI and the US' CIA in the background.

Finally, let me explain the three principles I believe necessary for stabilizing the situation in Afghanistan. Efforts are needed at three levels in Afghanistan: (1) stabilization, (2) maintenance of security, and (3) reconstruction/development. The first of these, stabilization, is a domestic matter for the Afghans themselves, and the various forces within the country must come together to establish a political system/power structure; outside parties should not interfere. The second, maintenance of security, should be pursued through cooperation between neighboring countries in the region and Afghanistan. The third, reconstruction/development, should be addressed by the international community, and "new thinking" not dependent solely on the deployment of NATO/ISAF forces is required. The issue of Afghanistan should be tackled in these three dimensions.