

Chapter 1
Afghanistan Nation-Building, Six Years On
(*This paper was written in April 2008)

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On 11 September 2001, the world realized that peace and security in the 21st century required not only defending state borders, but also fighting against elusive enemies mixed amongst peoples, even far from home.¹ That fateful day thus changed the course of history of Afghanistan, which had for too long been ignored by the world. International aid was mobilized for Afghanistan at an unprecedented speed -- in part out of shocking revelation that a forgotten country with people left in desperate violence and poverty had become a launch pad for terrorists to strike at the heart of world power, and in part, of course, to show solidarity with the United States, which had suffered the horrible event. For whatever other reasons, the international intervention in Afghanistan gained wide legitimacy in the context of the “War Against Terror” declared by US President George W. Bush, however ambiguous the concept remained.

Yet, after six years of international intervention, Afghanistan’s future seems more uncertain than ever. In fact, the initial euphoria of hope and optimism expressed by millions of Afghans returning throughout the country to reconstruct their lives is rapidly turning into anxieties and doubts as violence increases in many parts of the country. Despite the international promises of a better life, many Afghans are losing confidence, frustrated by corrupt authorities and the continued lack of stable employment. As a result, the democratically elected government is rapidly losing popularity. Why is the situation unraveling and turning away from peace and stability, despite the years of international efforts designed to improve the people’s lives? Why do destructive forces continue to thrive unabated, even with the presence of international troops? In an attempt to address similar questions, there have been many studies published in recent months calling for a renewed strategy for Afghanistan,² but few analyses go beyond military and security strategies.

¹ See “The Utility of Force – the Art of War in the Modern World,” by Gen. Rupert Smith on the changing nature of conflict.

² See for example, “Revitalizing our efforts, Rethinking our Strategies,” Afghanistan Study Group report, 30 January 2008, Center for the Study of the Presidency; “Saving Afghanistan: An Appeal and Plan for Urgent Action,” Issue Brief, January 2008, Atlantic Council of the United States; “Afghanistan: The Need for International Resolve,” Asia Report No.145, 6 February 2008, International Crisis Group.

This paper provides an introductory overview of achievements made in Afghanistan since 2001, and outlines key issues as clues toward overcoming the current concerns. It emphasizes the perspectives of the people, in the hopes of bringing the assistance debate to the community level so that the nature and progress of the international intervention as a whole may be reviewed with a refocus on human security.

International intervention since 9/11

The swiftness with which governments have acted on Afghanistan following the 9/11 attacks is rather spectacular, if ambitious. The so-called Bonn process, established in December 2001, has guided the country through the adoption of a constitution as well as presidential and parliamentary elections. Unlike previous post-conflict interventions where international bodies took over administration in countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Cambodia and East Timor, the international intervention in Afghanistan is characterized as “small footprint”, emphasizing the importance of Afghan ownership and mindfully placing the UN peace-keeping mission (UNAMA) in the back seat to assist the government in caring for its people. The international efforts have focused on three main sectors -- security, governance and reconstruction – and responsibilities for supporting government programs have been divided between donors and aid agencies. In terms of aid policies, conscious efforts have been made to support a “seamless transition” from emergency humanitarian aid to development assistance, with a view to facilitating the early recovery of a self-sufficient state. The reconstruction of Afghanistan has thus begun, designed to create a “modern” state from what was left in the remains of war.

Chronology³

On 12 September 2001, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1368 authorizes international intervention in Afghanistan to combat “threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts.” On 7 October the US and the UK launch air strikes against Afghanistan as the Taliban refuse to hand over Osama bin Laden, held responsible for the 9/11 attacks. By mid-November, the coalition forces, aided by the Afghan Northern Alliance, oust the Taliban regime in Kabul and humanitarian aid workers resume emergency assistance. On 5 December, Afghan leaders agree on the Bonn peace process and Hamid Karzai heads the power-sharing arrangement. On 20 December, UNSCR 1386 authorizes the deployment of the International Security

³ Compiled from BBC, Reuters and UN documents.

Assistance Force (ISAF) to aid the interim authority. As the coalition forces drive the Taliban from Kandahar, millions of refugees and internally displaced Afghans begin to return.

Some sixty donor governments gather in Tokyo in January 2002, and pledge a total of US\$4.5 billion in reconstruction aid. ISAF begins to deploy, but only in Kabul. Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) continues hunting for Al Qaeda and Taliban remnants in the southeast. In June, the Grand Council (Loya Jirga) confirms Hamid Karzai as head of the Afghan Transitional Authority. By August 2003, NATO takes over ISAF command. Outside the capital, however, terrorists attack aid workers as they are seen to be on the side of the Western-backed interim administration.

In January 2004, the Loya Jirga adopts a new constitution and, in April, donors pledge US\$8 billion in Berlin. Presidential elections are held in October, with a turnout of nearly three-quarters of some 10 million registered voters. Hamid Karzai wins 55% of the vote, well over the 16% gained by the runner-up, and is officially inaugurated in December. By September 2005, the first parliamentary and provincial elections in more than 30 years are held.

In February 2006, the Afghan Compact is launched in London outlining a renewed framework of cooperation between Afghanistan and the international community. Donors pledge over US\$10 billion in reconstruction assistance for a five-year period. In May, violent anti-US protests erupt in Kabul, following an incident in which a US military vehicle crushed several Afghans. The number of civilian casualties continues to rise as OEF battles rage in the south. By July 2006, NATO takes over military operations from the US-led coalition forces in the south and eventually the east. Heavy fighting ensues in the southern provinces as the NATO and Afghan forces combat the anti-government forces.

In May 2007, Afghan and Pakistani troops clash over border disputes. By August, the UN reports a record yield in poppy cultivation, making the country the world's top producer of opium. In November, a suicide attack on a parliamentary delegation kills 41 people in the north. On 15 January 2008, militants strike the Serena Hotel in Kabul, killing 8 Afghans and foreigners.

Achievements to date

By 2007, Afghanistan as a whole has achieved much progress, not the least on the surface. Kabul has become a bustling city, with mobile phones and some spectacular constructions fit for a modern world. The city boasts glitzy department stores with customers window-shopping in burkas. On the outskirts, what was once a dried-up dam left in ruins by battle now contains plenty of water and floating gazebos, offering a peaceful weekend get-away for local families. In the vast plain of Shomali, north of the capital, the long deserted and mine-infested landscape has become busy with villagers and markets, steadily recovering as the region's bread-basket.

On the human development scale, more than 5 million refugees and displaced people have returned after years in exile and 6 million children are back to school, including 2 million girls. The health sector has improved, with 82% of the population covered by basic health-care services.⁴ The abysmal infant mortality rate has steadily declined by 18% since 2001⁵, and more mothers are being taught general hygiene to better protect their children. More than 132 million square meters of land have been cleared of mines and much of the ring-road highway has been restored, leaving a portion under construction in the insecure south.⁶

In terms of governance, the Bonn process has successfully led the state to assume a democratic structure, defying earlier doubts over the feasibility of the established timeline. Persistent fighting between warlords have been quelled with some legally incorporated into the political structure, and over 60,000 former soldiers have disarmed and demobilized. Disputed revenue from border customs has been incorporated into the national budget and the rate of economic growth has steadily risen by 8 to 14% in the past two years. The daily lives of the majority of Afghans have undoubtedly become more stable, save for occasional drought and other natural disasters.

Challenges

Despite the progress, however, insurgent activities and terrorist violence are on the rise. The UN reports a 20% increase in violent incidents between 2006 and 2007.

⁴ "The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security," Report of the Secretary-General to the General Assembly Sixty-second session, 21 September 2007.

⁵ "Afghanistan Health Sector Balanced Scorecard", Round Three, Afghan Ministry of Public Health with Johns Hopkins University & Indian Institute of Health, 2006.

⁶ Ibid.

Over 100 suicide attacks are recorded annually and are now reaching Kabul and the north. Rural communities remain desperately poor but some are too dangerous for aid to reach. Areas accessible to aid workers have fallen to 55% of the country, according to the UN, and the fatal attack on the Serena Hotel in January 2008 is forcing international aid workers to restrain their efforts further. Meanwhile, open “war against terror” continues to rage in the south and the country seems to be moving farther away from a “post-conflict” state.

The security situation naturally impacts also on the economy. The Afghan Investment Support Agency reported a 50% decrease in business investment in 2007, citing as factors the spread of insecurity and kidnapping, in addition to slow progress in private business reform and heavy bureaucracy.⁷ Conversely, the illegal economy is booming. In the absence of an agreement on effective counter-narcotics measures, poppy cultivation and production continue to expand. According to a recent World Bank survey, Afghanistan supplies more than 90% of the world’s opium, revenue from which accounts for 30% of its GDP.⁸ Uncontrolled drug production further stifles the restoration of law and order, feeding corruption, extremists and organized crime abroad. While the Taliban regime seemed to have managed the issue, the inability to effectively control narcotics wins no points for the current government.

Lessons Learned

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the international community promptly agreed on the need to intervene in Afghanistan with near unanimous approval. Six years down the road, however, the initial enthusiasm has sadly declined as the country disappears from the world headlines. By the end of 2007, the dissonance among the international community had become a public issue. The lack of coordination between troop mandates and civilian assistance have come to the fore and disagreements between the US and NATO countries over troop deployments have become an open dispute. The relations between the Afghan government and major donors have soured with the former’s rejection of a strong coordinator to oversee the international efforts. On the ground, both civilian and military personnel engaged in assisting Afghanistan have come to realize just how difficult it is in reality to build a “modern” state across a vast and porous land that barely scores on the human development index. Some

⁷ Figures and comments released by Afghan Investment Support Agency reported in the Financial Times, 29 January 2008.

⁸ “Afghanistan: Economic Incentives and Development Initiatives to Reduce Opium Production,” The World Bank and DFID, February 2008.

assistance programs have been effective but others have produced more problems, however well-intentioned at the start. Looking back, the international intervention in Afghanistan has suffered a series of teetering, if not confused, emphasis between military objectives and civilian assistance goals. To begin breaking the current stalemate, it is perhaps useful to examine some of the developments from the perspective of Afghan communities.

Security

When the Taliban was driven out of Kabul, people were enthusiastic about the future prospects for rebuilding their lives and country in peace. The organized brutality of the Taliban rule was over, yet violence did not disappear from the country as a whole. Kabul alone enjoyed relative security, with the arrival of ISAF to guard the capital, but the south remained a war-zone as the coalition forces fought Al Qaeda and remnants of the belligerent Taliban. Warlords were still fighting in the north, west and southeast and, as demobilization went underway, commanders of smaller groups roamed freely harassing villagers in remote communities. Most of the warlords and commanders had since disbanded, but the crime rate remained high in rural areas where there was a vacuum of law and order and a prevailing culture of impunity. In the early years, many of these sources of insecurity, affecting mainly rural communities, were left unaddressed so as not to destabilize the newly established interim authority and perhaps dampen the international commitment. Even the Afghan authorities themselves did not take security seriously at first, as they were more focused on absorbing the reconstruction and development aid. It was not until 2003 that security issues surfaced openly in the international debate, after the killing of foreign aid workers in the southern provinces.⁹

Meanwhile, as the “war against terror” gained an international consensus, Operation Enduring Freedom was never in question. Its strategy and tactics were military matters led by the US. The US above all was not interested initially in rebuilding Afghanistan, but only in capturing Osama bin Laden. Nor was the US eager to deploy ISAF outside of Kabul, despite several requests made by President Karzai and Mr. Brahimi, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Afghanistan, for additional troops to patrol the provinces.¹⁰ By 2003, insecurity in the deeper south was spreading and the US soldiers on the border were tasked with endless battles with

⁹ On 27 March 2003, Ricardo Mungia of ICRC was killed at a checkpoint in Kandahar. Mullah Dadullah, a Taliban commander responsible for ordering the killing and for the organization of numerous suicide attacks, was killed in a NATO raid in May 2007. On 16 November 2003, Bettina Goilard of the UNHCR was killed in a fusillade of bullets while driving in Ghazni.

¹⁰ “Afghanistan and Iraq: Failed States or Failed Wars?” Lakhdar Brahimi Lecture on Public Policy, Princeton University, 28 March 2007.

insurgents crossing freely across the border.¹¹ Then came the US war on Iraq. The newly opened frontline perhaps served to buy some security time for Afghanistan, as the foreign extremists rushed over to fight the Americans in Iraq. However, the Iraq experience only seemed to have created a new generation of better-trained and more vicious rebel fighters who eventually returned to the Afghan border, and violence surged in 2006. The war on Iraq not only impacted Afghanistan security-wise but, more importantly, it diverted attention and world resources.

Governance: threats to legitimacy and national solidarity

Despite the success of the presidential and parliamentary elections, people have begun to express disappointments and doubts about their elected government. The rush in international assistance has undoubtedly created expectations amongst the war-affected population, perhaps at unrealistic levels. While schools and canals are being reconstructed with development assistance and many areas are free of general violence, many Afghans are still left without job security. Impressively large houses in the city are built by the rich few, creating some jobs but only temporarily. Electricity remains a problem, hindering industrial development, and corruption and general crimes are often left unaddressed, particularly in the rural communities.¹² Meanwhile, Afghans see affluent internationals shuttling around in armored vehicles, rarely communicating with ordinary people on the street. Whether or not they are justified, more Afghans are questioning the fairness or prospects of the current situation as expressed in the local media.

Facing past criticisms for traveling too often abroad, President Karzai has been touring throughout the country since 2007, meeting people directly. While his presence is zealously welcomed by villagers, it is difficult to govern a country by personality alone. His personal apologies are certainly appreciated by people affected by misguided NATO attacks¹³, for example, but what is alienating people are not just the occasional misguided missiles but the frustration that the central government is incapable of caring for their lives, particularly in rural areas.

¹¹ There were only speculations about the impossible fights against insurgents at the porous border until Frank Gardner of the BBC produced a report in 2003.

¹² Attorney General Abdul Jabar Sabit tirelessly sees individuals who travel for days from all over the country to seek his audience and justice. While he impressively handles every claim on the spot with his legal texts and mobile phones, one is left to wonder if this is an effective way to rule justice in a vast country with more than 30 million people. (Taped and interviewed in May 2007)

¹³ On 16 May 2007, the President flew to Shindand to speak to some 600 villagers after 57 civilians had been killed in a NATO airstrike between 25 and 27 April. The ICRC reported 173 houses had been destroyed and nearly 2,000 people left homeless by the attack.

Of course, building the state capacity is no easy task. As one government official put it: “Afghans do not have the experience and do not know what a ‘democracy’ looks like, even for us in the government.” Combine that with the serious lack of bureaucratic capacity to build a “modern” state, and it will still take years for public systems to function satisfactorily throughout the country. Reality cannot wait, however. Without effective measures to address corruption, insecurity and steady income, the government cannot be expected to maintain credibility and the trust of its people. The blame will continue to go to the most visible, Western-backed president.

Aid dilemma

As parts of Afghanistan are becoming insecure and civilian aid workers are seen as government-supporting “enemies” from the rebels’ perspective, civilian access to those areas has lessened. However, desperate needs remain that require reaching those people, lest the extremists get to them first, making the place even more hostile. There have been endless debates over an aid dilemma: assistance is most needed to stabilize insecure areas, but it cannot be delivered to insecure areas. Even humanitarian aid agencies experienced in emergencies cannot be expected to run the gauntlet, and some stability is required for longer-term development assistance.

Civilian and military aid

Hence, provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs) have been created to support aid access as well as to build schools and bridges, technically in areas that civilian agencies cannot reach. Nonetheless, this has also created much confusion. It is hardly possible for Afghan villagers to distinguish between combat troops and those in PRTs assisting communities, while such a distinction is simply moot for the rebels. Sometimes even combat troops deliver assistance to villages and each PRT has a distinct mandate assigned by the home country. NGOs have raised serious concerns over such military engagement, claiming that it jeopardizes the neutrality of humanitarian aid .¹⁴

As controversial as the PRTs may be, however, the need for assistance remains large in remote, insecure areas. Without tangible benefits and protection from the central government, people are left without much choice but to obey the rebels’ rules.

¹⁴ Most aid activities in Afghanistan are clearly on the side of stability, supporting the government, than on that of the destabilizing rebels, yet agencies have legitimate concerns that the cross-over between military and civilian activities will further compromise safety of their aid operations. For a study on the military-civilian debate, see for example, “Fighting for Humanitarian Space: NGOs in Afghanistan,” Lara Olsen, *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Fall 2006, Vol 9, Issue 1.

Nevertheless, as Deputy Minister for Rural Rehabilitation and Development Asif Rahimi said, “PRTs may be helpful in building schools in insecure areas, but they could never substitute for the official development program nor cover the whole country.”¹⁵ To begin addressing this civilian-military dilemma, it would be useful if, on the one hand, the military mandate would be clarified and coordinated and, on the other, humanitarian and development agencies would find ways to reach areas that may not be 100% secure. The latter, of course, requires deeper understanding of communities and the cooperation of the Afghan people.

Humanitarian relief and development aid

One of the objectives in assisting Afghanistan has been to bridge the gap as quickly as possible between emergency humanitarian aid and development assistance. Since their engagement in Bosnia-Herzegovina, humanitarian agencies such as UNHCR have been addressing the existence of an unavoidable time gap between the two types of aid. For communities to become stable and self-sustainable, people must at some point cease to depend on humanitarian aid. Development assistance then becomes important in providing people with tools and skills to take charge of their livelihood but, as most development agencies have limited experience operating in unstable conditions, humanitarian requirements tend to lag. In the Afghanistan experience, the government itself provides the crucial missing link between humanitarian and development actors. Supporting the authorities and enhancing their capacity, therefore, has become the core requirement for effective delivery of international assistance.

The efforts to fill this “transition gap” have been a continuous challenge in practice, however. While many development agencies managed to engage relatively early, they have had to learn on the job to deliver under unpredictable situations. Meanwhile, Afghan capacity has to be built to absorb the assistance schemes. The so-called “transition gap” in assistance may be due also to the inevitable difference in funding bases. The bulk of humanitarian aid is delivered by multilateral agencies such as the UN. As requirements shift to development needs, larger development projects are delivered directly by governments. Bilateral aid by nature tends to be more rigid in its delivery requirements, as it comes under closer domestic scrutiny by the donor country. As such, development programs take more time before implementation, requiring more careful planning and agreements between the donor government and the recipient government. The gradual diversification and decentralization of international

¹⁵ Interviewed on 22 May 2007 in Kabul.

assistance may be due partly to this shift in the nature of assistance. Yet, the burden of improving the delivery system still lies with the donor community.

Rethinking “ownership”

To enhance Afghan ownership, the Afghan government led by then Minister of Finance Ashraf Ghani established a Consultative Group (CG) for each sector, with various donors and international agencies signing up to support the line ministries. CGs offer an innovative structure to coordinate international assistance under the Afghan national budget, officially executable as government strategy. The actual implementation, however, has been more than a challenge, as international actors have found a gaping lack of bureaucratic capacity in the Afghan government to absorb aid. Those who can communicate in English are precious few among the ministries and those having college degrees even fewer. What the international workers are facing is a sad result of the violent past that has over 23 years created a “lost generation”. Educated younger Afghans returning from abroad, on the other hand, tend to seek higher-paying jobs with international agencies, which understandably angers the Afghan authorities. In such circumstances, “placing Afghans in the driving seat” or respecting “ownership” inevitably has been more on paper, or in spirit at best, than in reality, when in fact tasks needed to get done yesterday. If “ownership” is to be seriously addressed, there needs to be a refocus on building Afghan capacity from a longer-term multi-generational perspective beyond the current focus on secondary school education.

If securing a stable Afghanistan is a requirement for global security, the international community may need to refocus its strategy for building Afghan capacity. Afghan “ownership” by definition requires sufficient level of delegation of authority to the nascent government, however clumsy it may seem. It remains the responsibility of donors to ensure that a given program actually supports the will of the Afghans and to refrain from donor-driven assistance as much as possible. Should Western-style “democracy” be hastily enforced beyond their capacity, for example, the efforts are bound to fail.

Way Forward

Human security

In reviewing the international intervention in Afghanistan to date, its effectiveness must be evaluated against the progress in enhancing human security.¹⁶ In

¹⁶ For a comprehensive study on human security, see “Human Security Now”, Report of the UN Commission on Human Security, May 2003.

Afghanistan, state security itself remains fragile, but military efforts to improve state security should not come at the expense of human security, nor should the responsibility of ensuring human security be left with the military alone. Military intervention may be a tool to improve state security, which is important, but it only partially serves the security needs of the civilian population in communities. People require a more comprehensive sense of security -- including physical welfare, employment, education, etc. -- in order to exercise their rights in all aspects of human life. To put it in the simplest terms, what the majority of Afghan citizens long for as basic guarantees are security (no more conflict), law and order (no arbitrary harassments in their communities) and sustainable livelihoods. If for whatever reason people see the government as unable or unwilling to fulfill these expectations, discontent will grow and in turn feed the destabilizing forces. As the government capacity is low, all the more attention must be paid to raising the level of self-sufficiency of rural communities, to eventually tie in with the central administration.

In this respect, the establishment of the Community Development Council (CDC) under the National Solidarity Program is an interesting initiative designed to have communities work together through the reestablishment of communal structures.¹⁷ It is an ambitious national program designed eventually to reach all areas. The on-going experiment illustrates the difficulties of working in communities that merit further studies and modifications. One report recommends that the program diversify projects to include income-generation activities for future sustainability and warns that, once people are mobilized, the results of unfulfilled expectations can be harmful.¹⁸ While building roads or waterways is no doubt beneficial to the communities, what the people need are jobs to sustain their livelihood and to be able to build on such initiatives and take charge of their own communities.

To enhance security and the rule of law in communities, the US and Germany revamped in 2007 a program to train up to 82,000 Afghan national police. It may yet be effective to have a civilian police force to guard the communities, but the policing system itself is rather a foreign concept to the Afghans.¹⁹ In fact, Afghans have had their own ways of regulating conduct in communities, often enforced by village leaders or mullahs and deeply engrained in their tribal base. Years of conflict certainly have eroded

¹⁷ See various reports produced by ACTED, which implements CDC projects.

¹⁸ "Transition Strategy and Cycle 2+ Communities" A Study of NSP, ACTED.

¹⁹ Commander of the Police Academy, Lt. General Sayed Mohammad Qudossi, interviewed in May 2007.

communal structures, but the basic values and principles still exist among the people. Building on them, not destroying them, is crucial especially at a time when the extremists seem to be taking advantage of the vacuum created while attempting to establish “modern” societal structures.

Seen from a human security perspective, some of the challenges have common problems. Returning refugees, demobilized soldiers and poppy-growing farmers, for example, all have the same need to find viable means to support their families. As Rubin and Sherman importantly point out in their recent study on narcotics,²⁰ it is not the poppy-growing that makes the places insecure. Rather, it is the insecurity that forces people with no choice but to grow poppies or engage in other illegal activities for survival. The vast majority of Afghans hope to engage in peaceful, legal livelihoods, finds the report. If so, there could be more attempts to create jobs and markets, however small, to reach people in remote communities. Currently, aid agencies are shut out from insecure areas, but even the most insecure areas have pockets and moments of peace. The international community must find ways to reach those communities, with deeper understanding and cooperation from the local population. In terms of Afghan capacity, it should not be forgotten that the Afghan people have much more experience negotiating their ways through troubles than foreigners, precisely because they understand the human relations in the communities. For aid agencies to gain better understanding, more expertise could be shared also between humanitarian and development agencies, as many local partners working for years with humanitarian agencies have gained much experience reaching out to communities throughout Afghanistan.

Since employment is key to self-sufficiency and sustainable livelihood, more attention could be paid to helping private businesses create jobs and markets. A young Afghan businessman who returned from the West says that, while a couple of hundred young Afghan entrepreneurs returned to Afghanistan in 2002, many have since left as the security situation and commercial environment made it too difficult for smaller businesses to thrive. The lack of facilities and regulations stifled exports, he says, and fruits, for example, were left to rot at customs as suspected drugs. In addition to promoting long-term training and higher education, more could be done to help nascent companies gain access to markets and facilitate distribution. Delays in government regulations to facilitate commerce feed the discontent of aspiring youths, many of whom

²⁰ “Counter-narcotics to Stabilize Afghanistan: The False Promise of Crop Eradication,” Barnett R. Rubin and Jake Sherman, Center on International Cooperation, February 2008.

are still willing to take risks for the future of their country.

The Taliban question

Perhaps the most difficult challenge in the Afghan nation-building process is the issue of the Taliban, who are mainly ethnic Pashtuns with links to the south. The Bonn Agreement effectively excluded the Taliban from the political process, casting shadows over the country's stability. Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi, the former UN Secretary General's Special Representative heading UNAMA, recognizes that including the defeated "enemy" in the talks was impossible at a time when the US-led coalition forces had ousted the Taliban with the help of the rival Northern Alliance of mainly ethnic Tajik and Uzbek origin. Driven by the importance of inclusion, Mr. Brahimi had attempted to reach out to the moderate Taliban, but the idea hardly gained any support in international fora.²¹ For the most part, the Taliban issue was also thought to have disappeared at the end of 2001, until violence resurged by 2006.

The issue is further complicated by the widespread international use of the term "Taliban". The term is applied to militant foreigners, jihadists, boys in madrassas who may or may not be taught the extremist philosophy and even villagers who simply disagree with what they see as Western disrespect of their communities. Broad-brushing with the term "Taliban" leads to more tragedies. If villagers affected by missiles reject the international troops, they are too easily labeled Taliban and termed a legitimate target. Collateral damage may not be avoided completely in an open war, but this is hardly the way to win the "hearts and minds" of the people.

When asked about how Afghan suicide-bombers have emerged, a government official said in private, "If a family were killed by US forces and a boy left an orphan with nothing, he might seriously consider a suicide mission to avenge their honor..." Without distinguishing the real "enemy" and reaching out to the rest, the problem of the "Taliban" is likely to continue, if not multiply. As President Karzai said in 2006, "Taliban are also children of Afghanistan"; the issue can no longer be ignored if the country is to become a whole. Reconciliation and justice for past violence eventually need to be addressed also, in ways that would allow communities to move forward.²²

²¹ "Afghanistan and Iraq: Failed States or Failed Wars?" Lakhdar Brahimi Lecture on Public Policy, Princeton University, 28 March 2007.

²² The Amnesty Law was passed in March 2007, generating much controversy.

Regional security

Of all the assistance necessary, that which requires more international attention is regional security. International agencies and embassies have country-specific mandates, so cross-border issues tend to fall from their agenda.²³ Yet stability in Afghanistan cannot be gained in isolation from developments in neighboring countries. Should Pakistan become unstable, it would surely impact security in Afghanistan. Uncontrolled escalation of the confrontation between the US and Iran, for example, would surely be a recipe for failure in Afghanistan.

The world is recognizing that the sources of instability in the southern and eastern provinces derive mainly from the tribal areas of Pakistan. Having to hold the southern front with an ever-broadening mandate, NATO is also starting to recognize that the current military strategy alone is insufficient to secure the country.²⁴ Yet NATO being the military wing of the international intervention, its ability is limited when engaging in political or aid discussions with surrounding countries, which is sorely required to secure the border areas. However, as current world politics do not seem to allow major powers to engage officially, no effective regional forum exists to address imminent issues. Ways to encourage dialogue between countries in the region should be found to ensure the stability not only of Afghanistan but the region as a whole.

Advocacy

Finally, the international community requires a stronger reasoning to sustain the commitment to Afghanistan. Six years after the 9/11 terror attacks, the public opinion trend in Western countries as well as in Japan is that of increasing indifference or frustration toward the issues of Afghanistan.²⁵ If a stable Afghanistan is deemed a requirement for global security, governments need to better present the case for continued assistance to Afghanistan and regain support of their domestic constituencies. It is no longer sufficient and perhaps inaccurate to continue referring to abstract terms as “the war on terror”, as the required commitment goes well beyond securing the deployment of military troops. The goals to be achieved and the consequences of failure

²³ UNHCR is one of the few agencies that routinely engage in cross-border dialogue, to ensure the protection and orderly return of some 2.14 million refugees remaining in Pakistan and 910,000 in Iran. The agency has hosted tri-partite meetings regularly since 2002 to facilitate discussions on refugee matters between Afghanistan and the two governments.

²⁴ A Lecture by Jamie Shea, NATO's Director for Policy, during the NATO delegation's visit to Tokyo in December 2007.

²⁵ NATO officials deplore the increasing public opinion pressure in Canada and the Netherlands, for example, to withdraw their troops. In Japan, the political debate on assistance to Afghanistan is entangled with Iraq and the controversy over the deployment of Self-Defense Forces for a refueling mission in the Gulf.

could be better articulated by having the global community refocus on issues such as those outlined above. Effective stories may differ from country to country on how the well-being of the people of Afghanistan relates to that of other citizens, but if Afghanistan were to return to its violent past, its effects would surely be felt again around the world.