

Chapter 2
Three Different Layers of Discussion
on the international intervention in Afghanistan

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Several meetings of this study group clearly showed that we cannot even agree to disagree to the extent to which the international community's intervention to Afghanistan has succeeded. It has been evident from the literature and from the personal contact that there are some people who applaud the success of the international community in Afghanistan while there are others who are appalled by the failure. It is not just because we might tend to be disproportionately influenced by our personal experience; we might be incapable of establishing a common denominator to measure the diversity of indicators thrown in front of us, or we might be too cautious, being aware of the limited information available to us. However, it is because each of us often looks at Afghanistan in a totally different context that we have identified the need to establish at least three different layers of discussion: the first is the global political environment, the second the international assistance regime specific to Afghanistan, and the third the local populace in Afghanistan.

Global Political Environment

There are multiple theories on the reason why the "coalition of the willing" decided to topple the Taliban regime and continue military operations to this day. There is, however, no doubt that these military operations can be positioned in the Global War on Terror (GWOT) as Operation Enduring Freedom – Afghanistan (OEF – A). Therefore, in this context the success/failure of post-9/11 Afghanistan is measured by the degree of achievement and progress of the GWOT. One could argue that, on the one hand, it is not evident to what extent OEF-A has made or could make a positive impact on the GWOT and, on the other hand, it is evident that the security situation in Afghanistan has rapidly worsened recently.

As is often the case with any war, though, the discourse surrounding the war is motivated more by political considerations than the facts; in the context of the GWOT one would find it hard to paint the Afghan situation as unsuccessful to the same extent it is hard to be pro-terrorism.

Therefore from this standpoint, Afghanistan can hardly escape from being an almost definitive success case. The commentator in this sense is not talking about Afghanistan, but about the global political scene.

International Assistance

Secondly there is more country-specific discussion about Afghanistan in the area of international assistance. Briefly looking at it now, one might point out once again that the discussion is not about Afghanistan, or not particularly about the Afghan people, but about the regime of international assistance *in Afghanistan*.

Starting from Security Council Resolution 1368 of 12 Sep 2001, the international community, represented by the UN, based its decision to intervene in Afghan affairs on "threats to international peace and security caused by terrorist acts". Security Council Resolution 1386 of 20 Dec 01 authorized the deployment of peacekeepers as an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), and Security Council Resolution 1401 of 28 Mar 2008 authorized the establishment of a PKO mission, the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan (UNAMA).

The mandate of UNAMA is vast, including virtually all sectors, categories of assistance and buzzwords: education, health, agriculture, returnee assistance, infrastructure, mine removal, security sector reform (national army, police, DDR, counter-narcotics, justice), rule of law, democratization, elections, governance, humanitarian assistance, post-conflict operations, reconstruction, development, human security, peace-building, etc.

There are a certain number of issues that make a difference in evaluating the situation in Afghanistan, among which are:

i) The ISAF authorized by the UN Security Council is different in nature from OEF-A in that it aims to maintain security, not to combat a particular group as OEF-A does. However, distinguishing between the two military operations has been difficult, if not impossible, for ordinary Afghans from the outset and has become increasingly vague, particularly since NATO took over the whole ISAF.

ii) As international assistance is modeled on the modern Western state/system with rare exceptions, UNAMA is essentially mandated to build a modern state from

scratch, or destined to engage in a huge enterprise that might mean the "external modernization" of Afghanistan.

iii) There existed a coordination mechanism for Afghanistan in the pre-9/11 period, which served as a leading case of UN coordination in the context of UN reform. After a few months' vacuum period, a PKO mission (UNAMA) was established to take over the coordinator's role. However, it took UNAMA a long time to build up functional capacity, particularly for Pillar II (Assistance), and during this time Afghans started to question the UN's role as coordinator.

vi) With UN coordination functions incapacitated on the one hand and contributions flagging among donor countries due to bilateralization and/or competition on the other, Afghans had a limited opportunity to gain a sense of ownership of the whole endeavor of reconstructing their own country.

v) While discussions on the structure and menu of the assistance regime menu were underway, the international community as a whole suffered from limited access to the indigenous knowledge about Afghanistan needed to make its intervention more effective. It can be hardly be blamed for applying templates.

Discussing such issues as the above could well lead to a different set of assessments of the Afghan situation from that one can get from the standpoint of the global political environment.

Community

Lastly there are those people whose assessment of the situation in Afghanistan is based neither on global politics nor the international assistance regime, but on Afghanistan and the Afghan people. Images and anecdotes of Afghan people in plight are extensively used as resources in the media, which in effect helped build an impression of Afghans as passive receivers of aid rather than active players in state building.

However, these people are facing challenges; security restrictions on the movements of aid workers prevent them from understanding and learning about Afghans in the rural areas, where the majority of Afghans reside. As the OEF has mostly fought out of sight of large cities, Afghan communities caught in the battle are beyond the reach of aid organizations and can hardly gain access to any relief.

Lack of understanding or biased understanding of ordinary Afghans in the rural areas was compensated for by community ideal types, on which the assistance projects were largely based. The convenience of aid organizations rather than the needs of Afghans served as the criteria for assistance provision, enlarging the development gap between urban dwellers and Afghans in traditional communities.

There have been many “community assistance projects” solely intended to reach the Afghan people. They often result in the creation of a new or artificial community despite the presence of a traditional community, as any assistance project attracts people who seek to benefit from it. It is not rare for aid workers engaged in community projects to be frustrated by the fact that the community itself does not keep to the agreed courses of action.

Even if such a newly made or rather artificial community largely overlaps the traditional community already in place, there remains on the one hand some part of the artificial community that is not part of the traditional one, and on the other some part of the traditional community that is not part of the artificial one. The former can be a spoiler as it does not belong to the real traditional community and hence seeks only short-term gain, while the latter can be a protestor as it naturally objects to the artificial community created by the external intervention.

The end result, despite the good intentions of the project, could be devastating: the creation of tensions or, worse, conflicts among Afghans within and around the community.

Not only simple disillusion on the part of Afghans caused by the lack of perceptible benefits from the international community but also such factors as the above causing tensions among Afghans have given rise to greater tolerance of outside insurgents among Afghan communities, which has worsened the overall security situation.

Concluding Remarks

We have seen three different layers of discussion about the situation in Afghanistan; the first is the global political environment, the second the international assistance regime, and the third Afghan communities. Each of them has its own merits in assessing the situation in Afghanistan. However, we find it not very productive to

present a view without identifying the layer that such view is addressing.

We are not charged to express a political opinion, and therefore we will not further address the global political environment. However, we need to be alert to its inevitable influence on views even when we discuss the other two layers. As to the second layer, the international assistance regime, we have identified some of its inherent issues, but perhaps the more fundamental issue is the fact that its funding is also highly dependent on the global political environment. It is fair to say that there has been increasing attention to local communities, to which we refer as the third layer here. It is partly because of the realization that, without community well-being, the stability of Afghanistan cannot be secured, and thus the global political goal would not be achieved. Therefore, from the first and second to the third layer, and then back to the first layer, they are interconnected in a circular relationship.