

Afghanistan: The tale of a failure foretold

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When and for what reasons did the international coalition fail?

Reconstructing the various phases of the international community's action in Afghanistan is a complex exercise: years of storytelling by the United States and NATO have distorted the reality of our engagement, strategies and results in Afghanistan². The myth of victory, the sometimes misleading explanations for our presence in the country³ and the rewriting of the history of the mission of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)⁴ in Afghanistan and of the conditions on the ground have combined — with vast quantities of statistics, charts and PowerPoint presentations — to convince public opinion of the success of the mission and to justify the human and financial resources deployed⁵. And, over time, the gap between the official discourse and the reality on the ground has widened⁶.

More than ten years after the conflict began, the coalition's often ambitious and sometimes conflicting objectives have only been very partially achieved, calling into question NATO's role and its credibility as a global actor. While it is true that the Taliban regime was ousted (although the movement continues to exist) and Osama bin Laden killed (only after a ten-year manhunt), insecurity, instability, corruption and poverty have not been eradicated.

There are several reasons for the failure, as this article will seek to demonstrate: the ISAF's strategy lacked clarity and consistency, there was a failure to coordinate the international community's efforts, and errors in analyzing the Afghan situation resulted in poor decision-making. It is unfortunately too late to change the course of the international action in Afghanistan. However, it is not too late to learn from the experience.

THE 2001 INVASION OF AFGHANISTAN: A STRATEGIC TRAP

Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, the US intelligence services quickly identified Osama bin Laden as the man behind the attacks and located him in Afghanistan. The United Nations Security Council demanded compliance with resolution 1333, dating from December 2000, which itself referred to resolution 1267 from 1999. Thus, the Security Council demanded "that the Taliban comply with resolution 1267 (1999) and, in particular, cease the provision of sanctuary and training for international terrorists and their organizations, take appropriate and effective measures to ensure that the territory under its control is not used for terrorist installations and camps (...) and that the Taliban comply without further delay with the demand of the Security Council in paragraph 2 of resolution 1267 (1999) that requires the Taliban to turn over

(1) A researcher at IRIS, Charlotte Lepri was policy advisor to ISAF in Kabul on local governance issues (September 2011 to February 2012).

(2) For further information, see Lt.-Col Daniel Davis, "Truth, Lies, and Afghanistan," *Armed Forces Journal*, February 2012, <http://armedforcesjournal.com/2012/02/8904030>

(3) President of the Republic Nicolas Sarkozy has, for example, on numerous occasions cited the case of "the little girl who had her hand cut off because she had nail polish on" ("Devant Obama, Sarkozy ressort la légende des talibans et du vernis à ongles," *20 Minutes*, July 26, 2008, <http://www.20minutes.fr/monde/afghanistan/242938-Monde-Devant-Obama-Sarkozy-ressort-la-legende-des-talibans-et-du-vernis-a-ongles.php>). This example had already been used by Laura Bush in November 2001 (Laura Bush on Taliban Oppression on Women, November 17, 2001, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials/attacked/transcripts/laurabushtext_111701.html)

(4) The ISAF (International Security Assistance Force), acting under UN mandate, is deployed in Afghanistan under the authority of the United Nations Security Council. Its mission is to assist "the Afghan government in establishing a secure and stable environment. To this end, ISAF forces conduct security and stability operations throughout the country together with the Afghan National Security Forces and are directly involved in the development of the Afghan National Security Forces through mentoring, training and equipping" (See NATO site: <http://www.isaf.nato.int/mission.html>).

(5) For further information, see Anthony H. Cordesman, "The Failures That Shaped (and Almost Lost) the Afghan War," Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2011 (in seven parts: <http://csis.org/publication/failures-shaped-and-almost-lost-afghan-war>)

(6) NATO's Secretary General, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, thus stated on January 30, 2012 that NATO is "the most successful Alliance in history," a surprising assertion given the Alliance's known difficulties in Afghanistan.

Usama bin Laden to appropriate authorities”⁷. The refusal of the Taliban leadership in Kabul to deliver bin Laden triggered an immediate military response.

A large number of countries and international organizations expressed their solidarity with the United States, which called on its allies to form a coalition to fight terrorism. About twenty countries came forward, although most of the human and financial resources were provided by the United States.

Operation Enduring Freedom began on October 7, 2001 with the heavy bombing of Afghan military installations and the bases established by the Al-Qaeda network. The goal was to end the Taliban regime (by supporting the action of the Northern Alliance) and Al-Qaeda’s use of Afghan territory as a base for terrorist activity. By mid-November, the United States and its allies had ousted the Taliban regime but were unable to dismantle the terrorist networks and arrest bin Laden or Mullah Omar (the leader of the Taliban). However, in the aftermath of the collapse of the Taliban leadership in Kabul, there was concern that ethnic rivalries would lead to further chaos in the country. The international community thus undertook two initiatives, one political in nature and the other related to security.

First, the United Nations held the first International Conference on the future of Afghanistan in Bonn from November 27 to December 5, 2001, attended by about a dozen countries and four Afghan delegations⁸. The decision was made to form a provisional government led by Hamid Karzai. Second, ISAF, mandated by the UN, was created in December 2001 “to assist the Afghan Interim Authority in the maintenance of security in Kabul and its surrounding areas, so that the Afghan Interim Authority as well as the personnel of the United Nations can operate in a secure environment”⁹.

The Taliban were excluded from the discussions on resolving the conflict, which prevented a political agreement from being reached at the Bonn Conference. This was a victor’s peace without the vanquished, who were viewed as pariahs and, from that time on, as insignificant, in light of their rapid military rout. In fact, the doctrine of “destroy and defeat the enemy” was instilled in American soldiers: there were therefore no final negotiations, because there was no longer anyone to talk to....

As Gilles Dorronsoro highlights, “In the wake of the events of September 11, there was a proliferation of interpretive discourses and baseless forecasts.” Most commentators, too busy condemning Osama bin Laden’s “fanaticism” and the Taliban regime’s “medievalism,” underestimated the strategic trap that the invitation to invade Afghanistan represented. More surprisingly, certain experts in the region backed the theory that the Taliban were external to Afghan society, despite all the evidence to the contrary. The alleged weakness of the Taliban’s presence made it possible to envision a rapid exit from the crisis and a limited military investment by the Western powers”¹⁰.

Thus, the countries in the coalition had a poor understanding of the composition and motivations of the insurgency. As the anthropologist George Lefevre highlights¹¹, the historical, mainly Pashtun, Afghan Taliban (followers of the Mullah Omar), who were conducting a national jihad to recapture territory in the name of Sharia, had a different plan from the Al-Qaeda networks, which were conducting an international jihad against the West. But these two separate movements gradually came to share the same objective: driving the coalition forces out of Afghanistan.

(7) United Nations Security Council Resolution 1333: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/806/62/PDF/N0080662.pdf?OpenElement>

(8) A Northern Alliance delegation (composed of Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras), a delegation from the entourage of the exiled king Zahir Shah (composed of Pashtuns), a delegation known as the “Cyprus group” (backed by Iran) and a delegation known as the “Peshawar group” (backed by Pakistan). There was no Taliban delegation.

(9) United Nations Security Council Resolution 1386, December 20, 2001, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N01/708/55/PDF/N0170855.pdf?OpenElement>

(10) Gilles Dorronsoro, “L’OTAN en Afghanistan, l’avenir incertain du Titanic ?,” AFRI 2008, Volume IX, July 24, 2008, http://www.afri-ct.org/IMG/pdf/08_Dorronsoro_Otan.pdf

(11) See in particular Georges Lefevre, “Afghanistan,” in Joao Medeiros (ed.), *Le mondial des nations. 30 chercheurs enquêtent sur l’identité nationale*, Paris, Choiseul, 2011, pp. 222-239.

AN ILL-DEFINED AND EVER-CHANGING MISSION

The inconsistency, and at times even inadequacy, of the military strategy implemented by the coalition, which underestimated the Taliban's ability to resume combat¹² and Pakistan's ambivalent role, contributed to the military and political failure in Afghanistan.

Until 2003, ISAF's mission was limited to keeping Kabul secure, but it was poorly coordinated with the American Enduring Freedom operation, which provided most of the troops and carried out operations focused on the war on terrorism in the Eastern and Southern regions. Nevertheless, the wave of violence in 2003, affecting soldiers and civilians, belied the official American discourse, which stated that security had been restored in Afghanistan. The level of insecurity even led UN and humanitarian organizations to withdraw from the most sensitive areas. The mission therefore evolved as of the end of 2003. ISAF was placed under NATO command¹³ and was gradually deployed across the Afghan territory. A broader strategy was defined, taking a civil-military nation-building approach which gradually came to encompass anti-corruption, humanitarian aid, the strengthening of the Afghan government and the country's economic development. The position of Senior Civilian Representative in Afghanistan was created (October 2003), tasked with "representing the political leadership of the Alliance officially and publicly," and the number of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs)¹⁴ expanded. The number of countries contributing to ISAF also increased¹⁵.

However, the Bush administration quickly neglected Afghanistan, as it wanted to redeploy most of the US forces in that theater to prepare for the war in Iraq. The strategic shift of 2003 remained incomplete, for want of resources and political will.

Afghanistan re-emerged as a priority thanks to the election of Barack Obama in November 2008. Believing that the main threat came from the resurgence of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan and Pakistan¹⁶, President Obama decided to withdraw from Iraq and intensify the effort in Afghanistan. But, in the interim, the insurgents had regrouped in areas over which the Allies had no control, with the support of one segment of the Pakistani security apparatus. Reflecting the influence of senior US military personnel, a "new strategy" was defined after Barack Obama took office: the counterinsurgency (COIN)¹⁷ became the prism through which the coalition's strategy in Afghanistan was developed, and the decision was made to send 30,000 US soldiers as reinforcements¹⁸.

The strategy drawn up by the Obama administration proved unproductive. First, sending additional troops was not sufficient to implement a real counterinsurgency strategy, leading to the increasingly systematic use of air strikes, the accuracy of which could not always be guaranteed. The withdrawal of 33,000 US "surge" soldiers and the retreat to the strategic "Bagram, Kabul, Kandahar" axis further confirmed that the ambitious counterinsurgency objective was quickly giving way to a more limited war on terrorism strategy. In addition, the coalition forces were never truly able to "win the hearts and minds" of the Afghan people and the image of the

(12) The insurgent movements now have little trouble recruiting fighters as the population has not yet seen any pick-up in the economy and believes that the international community is in collusion with the Karzai government, which is viewed as weak and corrupt.

(13) United Nations Security Council Resolution 1510: <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N03/555/55/PDF/N0355555.pdf?OpenElement>

(14) PRTs are "military and civilian personnel working in Afghanistan's provinces to provide security for aid works and help humanitarian assistance or reconstruction tasks in areas with ongoing conflict or high levels of insecurity" (NATO site).

(15) Before 2003, ISAF comprised about twenty contributing nations and 5,000 soldiers. Today, 51 nations provide nearly 130,000 soldiers.

(16) The neologism "AfPak" moreover embodies this new approach, by describing the Afghanistan-Pakistan region as a single theater of operations.

(17) The counterinsurgency consists not only of neutralizing the enemy by military means, but also requires that the insurgent enemy be permanently separated from the population, and that the population back the legitimate authority. COIN is population-centric, unlike conventional war, which is enemy-focused.

(18) During a speech at West Point on December 1, 2009, President Obama announced a surge (the sending of an additional 30,000 soldiers) and an acceleration in the training of the Afghan security forces, as well as an outline of the exit timetable, setting July 2011 as the start of the American withdrawal. This new strategy was the result of a compromise between proponents of a rapid exit from the crisis (the president's political advisors) and proponents of sending substantial reinforcements (senior military personnel). Bob Woodward's book, *Obama's Wars* (Simon & Schuster, 2010) paints a clear picture of the internal quarrels between the two camps.

US army (and, beyond that, of the entire coalition) was marred by blunders and incidents¹⁹. Lastly, the implementation of the comprehensive approach, which targeted better “coordination among international and local, civilian and military actors during crises”²⁰, was too little, too late.

VIRTUALLY INSURMOUNTABLE MILITARY CHALLENGES

Complex military coordination

Coordinating the international coalition has proven to be a major challenge. Each nation has different rules of engagement. Certain countries have national restrictions on the use of force (“caveats”), which constrain the coalition’s operational effectiveness and limit tactical actions in certain areas. The United States had moreover called for these restrictions to be lifted at the Riga Summit in 2006, to no avail. For example, the German military staff cannot plan an operation without the prior authorization of the Bundestag, thus limiting the use of German forces in combat.

Additionally, the Americans’ “Five Eyes” system, i.e., the sharing of sensitive information with a limited circle of traditional allies (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom) quickly gave rise to frustration and the feeling among some of the key contributing countries excluded from Five Eyes, primarily France and Italy, that this was a two-tier coalition.

Lastly, the leading role played by the United States in NATO’s mission in Afghanistan, in terms of personnel, financing and strategic direction, made for difficult coordination within the international coalition. The non-Five Eyes contributing countries, in fact the non-Americans, were rarely involved in the most

important decisions, often made by Washington in close coordination with the American officers at ISAF’s headquarters in Kabul. Faced with a strategy that has largely been forced on them by the United States, the other nations have lost interest in the major strategic issues in Afghanistan and have sometimes turned to other initiatives, in particular those related to development. Indirectly, this has weakened the cohesion of the coalition, which is nevertheless considered the mission’s “center of gravity.” In fact, this has in some ways provided justification for nations’ individual initiatives and for a certain egoism, with respect to projects as well as timelines — this is particularly evident in the current withdrawal phase. Had these nations been more closely involved in the key decisions made by ISAF headquarters, at the very least via input from the officers stationed there, the feeling of cohesion would perhaps have been stronger, making isolated national decisions more difficult.

The challenge of establishing the Afghan security forces

One of the key challenges of the “new” American strategy in 2008-2009 was to establish the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF²¹) and to ensure that they would be professional, disciplined and capable of effectively taking responsibility for the security of the Afghan people and territory.

The targets were ambitious: an increase in the ANSF from 70,000 in 2008 to 260,000 in 2010, and then 352,000 in October 2012. The emphasis was on training, a task that has been complicated by the high illiteracy rate among the Afghan population, on the one hand, and by the inappropriateness of certain Western methods and standards, on the other. The massive recruitment, which was necessary to reach the stated targets, also favored quantity over quality and this had two major negative

(19) To cite just a few examples: the Koran burnings, night raids, civilian losses during military operations, the video of Marines urinating on insurgent corpses, etc. These scandals were moreover widely exploited by the Taliban and President Karzai.

(20) Cécile Wendling, *L'approche globale dans la gestion civilo-militaire des crises, Analyse critique et prospective du concept*, Cahier de l'IRSEM, no. 6, 2010.

(21) The ANSF (Afghan National Security Forces) comprise the Afghan army (ANA), air force (AAF) and police (ANP).

repercussions: the risk of insurgents infiltrating the ranks of the Afghan recruits²² and a high desertion rate²³. The low wages also encouraged corruption.

The main challenge, however, remains to transform the Afghan army into a legitimate and structured institution that creates a sense of national cohesion. This army is in fact dealing with problems such as the lack of sufficiently trained and experienced staff and officers, the lack of cohesion (in particular among officers, who have different backgrounds and training), ethnic divisions and the heavy dependence on NATO for financial, human and logistics support. This will hold true for many years to come, as Afghanistan does not have the resources to maintain its security forces.

As Ali Ahmed Jalali highlights, “No credible military capacity can emerge in a vacuum. (...) Building security capacities is not simply an exercise in generating more and more army *kandaks*²⁴ and police units. Security forces must be developed in the context of an integrated civil-military institution-building effort. Developing the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police without tackling the Afghan government’s other weaknesses such as rule of law issues, corruption and the influence of non-state power brokers²⁵ seriously undermines the force’s effectiveness, whatever its numerical strength”²⁶.

INADEQUATE CONTROL OVER COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH²⁷ AND DEVELOPMENT AID

When the priority should have been the country’s development and reconstruction, i.e., from the very beginning of the coalition’s intervention in Afghanistan, it was in fact the military war on terrorism. The security effort did not lead to stability in the country. The international coalition, cognizant of this obstacle, has gradually attempted to take better account of the political and economic challenges. But the 2003 civil-military approach, which was too measured, yielded little in the way of concrete results. The 2008-2009 comprehensive approach came too late and relied too heavily on soldiers to assume “governance” and “development” functions rather than taking an approach that would involve the different national and international actors present in Afghanistan. The lack of a clear scope for what NATO could or could not include in its comprehensive approach led the Alliance to absorb all of the civil-military activities, at the expense of a coordinated approach that involved all of the actors with a presence in the country.

The entanglement of the different missions (ISAF, Enduring Freedom, EUPOL²⁸, UNAMA²⁹, etc.) also adds to the complexity of the consistency and coordination of the international action³⁰. After more than ten years on the ground, ISAF and the

(22) This issue is particularly acute in that, for mostly financial reasons, the stated objective of 352,000 ANSF for 2014, which is poised to be achieved, has been reduced to 228,500, leaving unanswered — for the time being — the matter of the future of the 123,500 personnel who have been educated and trained and who will have to leave the ANSF and could well join the ranks of the insurgency. In addition, the fate of the 30,000 ALP (Afghan local police, financed, armed and trained by the United States) has also not been decided; this could, in the future, be a potentially serious factor in local destabilization (for more information see Eric de Lavarène, “Afghanistan, voyage en terre brûlée,” *Le Temps*, April 17, 2012 and Lynn Yoshikawa and Matt Pennington, “Afghan Local Police: when the solution becomes the problem,” *Foreign Policy, AfPak Channel*, October 27, 2011, http://afpak.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/10/27/afghan_local_police_when_the_solution_becomes_the_problem).

(23) According to the Washington Post, the attrition rate has doubled in recent months (one in seven soldiers has deserted), magnified by the acceleration in the recruitment of soldiers to meet NATO’s targets. The reasons vary: low wages, seasonal issues (soldiers desert more frequently in the summer, at harvest time), shifting allegiances, weak or corrupt leadership, etc. Joshua Partlow, “More Afghan soldiers deserting the army, NATO statistics show,” *The Washington Post*, September 2, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia-pacific/more-afghan-soldiers-deserting-the-army/2011/08/31/gIQAxBxFTV_story.html.

(24) Battalions.

(25) In Afghanistan’s case, this refers to individuals with no official duties who use their political and business connections to further their own interests.

(26) Luis Peral and Ashley J. Tellis (ed), *Afghanistan 2011-2014 and beyond : from support operations to sustainable peace*, EUISS and Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Juin 2011, p. 15.

(27) The comprehensive approach is used in situations where military force alone is not sufficient to restore stability in a region in crisis. The comprehensive approach intersects upstream with civilian and military approaches to improve their coordination, involves all the actors concerned (at the national and multinational level) and has the objective of including military, security, diplomatic, economic and development considerations when responding to the crisis.

(28) EUPOL-Afghanistan was created on May 30, 2007 by joint action 2007/369/CFSP of the Council of the European Union, with the primary objective of significantly contributing to the establishment under Afghan ownership of sustainable and effective civilian policing arrangements.

(29) The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) was created on March 28, 2002 by United Nations Security Council resolution 1401 to strengthen Afghan institutions and assist in the reconstruction. It is a political and support mission to build peace in Afghanistan.

(30) For more information, see William C. Butcher, “The incomplete approach: Adding structure to international cooperation in Afghanistan,” U.S. Army War College, February 2009, <http://www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?AD=ADA511510>.

donors are still having the same problems coordinating among themselves and with the Afghan government. Under the “lead nation” approach, developed in 2002, different countries were given responsibility for a particular aspect of the country’s reconstruction. At an international conference of the G8 in Geneva in April 2002, the reform of the security sector was thus divided into five pillars, with each country assigned one pillar: judiciary reform for Italy; police reform for Germany; counter-narcotics for the United Kingdom, reform of the military sector for the United States; and disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) for Japan³¹. But no effort was made to ensure any overall consistency through coordination mechanisms among the five countries, which at times would territorialize their action (depending on their area of responsibility) and none of the countries concerned themselves with the need to involve the Afghan administration so that it could take on these reforms itself. The same problem arose with respect to oversight of the PRTs, managed by the different countries in their areas of responsibility if not independently, then at the very least without coordinating with the other allies or with the Afghan government.

The fundamental problem lies in the differences in objectives, strategies and methods among the actors concerned, based on their own interests, reasoning and constraints. As Serge Michailof highlights, “In just a few years, roughly from 2002 to 2004, Afghanistan has in fact become a textbook example of the adverse consequences of haphazard project aid that has not been properly coordinated by either a government or a group of donors

likely to impose a basic level of discipline”³². The numerous governance and development programs worth several hundreds of millions of dollars were generally either counter-productive (with the effects of one interfering with those of the other), or similar (leading to project overlaps), when they were not just inappropriate for the situation³³.

To lessen these difficulties, a Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB) was established at the 2006 London Conference, co-chaired by the Afghan government and UNAMA and bringing together the main donor countries. But this Board is less a coordination body than simply a place for consultation, with no binding authority.

Since 2008³⁴, the mission of coordinating aid and civilian actions has been clearly assigned to UNAMA, which was established in 2002 and whose mandate is renewed every year. But “programs were established in isolation from the start, with no consistent strategy or unified decision-making center endowed with a budget that would give it control over the entire operation”³⁵. Furthermore, the leading role of the United States Embassy (which tends to develop its own programs without consulting with the other donors) and of the ISAF’s headquarters (which tends to want to take charge of everything), as well as the donors’ limited willingness to be coordinated³⁶, has ultimately limited the scope of United Nations’ action in Afghanistan. One qualification must be made, however: the dominance of the United States and ISAF also addressed a vacuum that had to be filled. For reasons to do with politics, finances, security and even inclination, many international organizations did not

(31) Mark Sedra, « Security Sector Reform in Afghanistan: The Slide towards Expediency », *International Peacekeeping*, vol. 13, no. 1 (2006), 94–110

(32) Serge Michailof, “Le défi de la reconstruction de l’administration en Afghanistan,” in Jean-Marc Châtaigner and Hervé Magro (eds.), *Etats et sociétés fragiles, Entre conflits, reconstruction et développement*, Pub. Karthala, 2007.

(33) This is the case, for example, for the SIKa (Stability In Key Areas) program, which was intended to help the districts provide better services and improve governance at the local level. But this program is the counter-example of the programs that should be developed in Afghanistan: it makes use of outside contractors rather than Afghan resources, it is not managed in coordination with other similar programs, it relies on structures that have no legal basis (the District Development Assemblies were created by donors, pending the election of District Councils), the money does not come from the Afghan national budget, its objectives are vague and its means of implementation are non-existent.

(34) United Nations Security Council Resolution 1806.

(35) Hervé Hutin, “La sécurité internationale et le conflit afghan : Une analyse en termes de Statebuilding et de seuil de capacité institutionnelle,” in J. Fontanel (ed.), *Economie politique de la sécurité internationale*, Collection “La librairie des humanités,” L’Harmattan, 2010.

(36) This is particularly noticeable when one considers the limited pooling of development funds intended for Afghanistan. Many donors prefer to finance programs unilaterally, for greater visibility, rather than contribute to common funds, such as the World Bank’s Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF).

take on the problems that arose (and continue to arise) in Afghanistan and were not equal to the challenges, forcing the United States and ISAF to act and further increase their involvement simply because no one else would do so in their stead.

Furthermore, the Afghan population tends to blame the UN for the scant progress made in terms of governance and development. UNAMA lost a little more of its credibility in the wake of the 2009 controversy over the presidential election fraud. While UNAMA is now encouraging donor countries to follow a joint roadmap, it must still provide assurance as to the internal consistency of its own structure in Afghanistan (27 UN agencies, funds and programs exist in parallel) and its ability to effectively coordinate the international action.

ERRORS OF ANALYSIS

The failure of NATO (and, more generally, of the international community) in Afghanistan is also related to errors of analysis and a poor understanding of what Afghanistan is, of the internal motivations and networks, of the country's history and of the regional context.

The Allies thus did not grasp the particularities and historical and cultural characteristics of the country, making any attempt to improve the situation futile. The Westerners' behavior, their feeling of superiority and their arrogance in the face of Afghanistan's lagging development have clearly hampered the reconstruction efforts. The good intentions of certain institutions were not enough to establish a consistent and effective aid policy. Examples of this abound.

The establishment of a centralized authority in Kabul

Afghanistan is historically and culturally a decentralized country, with a largely tribal and traditional society, autonomous regions and a non-existent

central state. In 2001, however, the participants in the Bonn Conference sought to create a strong central authority, capable of asserting itself throughout the country. This decision ultimately made the coalition's task more difficult: for years it focused its efforts primarily on developing the central authority, at the expense of the local level, in a country with no federal culture or experience. To fill the security and political vacuum at the local level, until the administration was capable of leading the entire country, the coalition relied on local warlords, who in fact became one of the greatest obstacles to the central authority's expansion beyond the capital.

Incapable of implementing the powers granted by the 2004 Constitution at the local level, the Kabul authority was cut off from the rest of the country. The central administration, via the different ministries, controls the country's resources but few of these resources trickle down to the local level. The local administration is therefore incapable of meeting the conditions required for legitimacy: providing basic services and representing the population. The Taliban and the local warlords have been able to take advantage of this situation, demonstrating that they can meet the needs of the local population by guaranteeing some degree of stability and providing basic services (such as a judiciary) in the regions neglected by the central authority.

The belief that the millions of dollars of international aid would turn Afghanistan around

International aid has been particularly improperly used; above all it has been managed and spent by donors on programs that they themselves defined and they themselves wanted to carry out (or have carried out by private companies) so that the programs would progress more quickly than if they had been managed by the Afghan administration. In addition, donor nations preferred to invest in high-profile projects more suitable for use for communication purposes.

The example of CERP (Commanders' Emergency Response Program) is particularly instructive. CERP funding is approved every year by the US Congress and made available to the commanders of the US forces to quickly meet urgent humanitarian and reconstruction needs and thus to gain the support of the local population (construction of schools, roads, bridges or hydroelectric dams³⁷). These reconstruction projects, referred to as "quick impact projects"³⁸, while admittedly necessary in a country where everything needs to be built, nevertheless had a number of flaws. They were not decided on and realized in coordination with the Afghan administration, they had manifold negative repercussions (corruption, failure to satisfy the Afghans' needs) and they did not take into account operating and maintenance costs, such as the payment of salaries to teachers and medical personnel, or the purchase of equipment (supplies, books, medicines, etc.). A short-term vision was encouraged (to make a good impression on the local population at a given time), one that often proved inconsistent, or even in contradiction, with the priorities of the Afghan government and the long-term development objectives.

In failing to adapt to "Afghan time," to take into consideration the needs of the population and to allow the Afghan administration to learn to handle the financial and administrative management of the development programs, the countries in the coalition did not build the necessary capacity within the Afghan administration. The latter is admittedly not blameless: lack of political will, corruption, clientelism, nepotism, civil servants' involvement in criminal or drug-trafficking networks, etc. But this is to forget that the Afghan state, destroyed by thirty years of conflict, is contending with constraints and demands that are beyond its experience.

An emphasis on Afghanistan at the expense of the region

Even though the international community agrees that the Afghan situation is intertwined with other challenges that involve the region as a whole, Afghanistan's neighbors have long been considered only from the standpoint of the challenges of logistics and supply chain management. However, peace talks cannot succeed without the involvement of Afghanistan's neighbors.

The United States was slow to understand that, for Pakistan, the presence of Islamist extremists in the Quetta region or of the Haqqani network in the tribal area of North Waziristan was less of a threat than India, its historical enemy. Faced with a rapprochement between Kabul and New Delhi³⁹, an unstable Afghanistan was, for Pakistan, the lesser evil. As for Iran, it shares some of the coalition's objectives, such as the fight against drug trafficking. However, this country was only minimally involved in resolving the conflict, in particular owing to the tension related to its nuclear program. Relations with the former Soviet republics, such as Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, were also poorly maintained, and these countries gradually reduced their support for the allied forces' action in Afghanistan. The poor relationship between NATO/the United States and Russia did nothing to expedite an exit from the crisis. Lastly, the coalition made little effort to involve China in the Afghanistan's future, even though it had an interest in the country's stability given its growing investments in the region.

(37) For fiscal year 2010, the US Congress allocated \$1 billion to CERP: see <http://fpc.state.gov/documents/organization/139236.pdf>

(38) The population should quickly see the results of these projects.

(39) Pakistan took a particularly negative view of the signature of a strategic partnership agreement between its two neighbors, India and Afghanistan, on October 4, 2011

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR AFGHANISTAN AFTER 2014 ?

The main challenges for the Afghan state are legitimacy and viability

President Karzai and his government have certainly been discredited by the population, which sees the Kabul government with detachment and suspicion, but also increasingly by international donors, which had nevertheless previously supported them. The government's inability to curb the endemic corruption that is undermining the regime has increased the national and international public's distrust. The crisis at Kabul Bank⁴⁰, the leading private Afghan bank where nearly one billion dollars "disappeared," has caused alarm among Afghans, but in particular among the leading donors⁴¹. It is only recently that the international community has understood that the extent of the corruption — which it encouraged — was as great a threat to Afghanistan's stability as the insurgency.

Furthermore, the election question is particularly sensitive. According to the Afghan Constitution, presidential elections must be held in 2014. The two major issues are the security and legitimacy of the vote. The risk of insurgent attacks (as the electoral calendar coincides with the withdrawal of the ISAF troops) or pressure, and the risk of government fraud (as was observed in 2009) will therefore have to be mitigated. This also poses the problem of how to ensure that these elections are held under acceptable conditions, without the direct involvement of the international community. Other internal political challenges also arise: electoral reform has still not been carried out and the opposition remains divided, without a leader who can serve as a unifying force.

Under these circumstances, there are three possible scenarios:

- the elections are postponed indefinitely, by means of a traditional assembly (*Loya Jirga*) that would extend President Karzai's term;
- the elections are held in 2013, a possibility mentioned by President Karzai last April (no doubt influenced by the United States). The idea would be to hold a vote while there are still enough international forces to provide security. A busy 2014 would also pose significant political and organizational problems for the Afghan government. This scenario certainly makes sense from a logistics and security standpoint, but the notion that a sitting president would actually be willing to shorten his term by one year is somewhat baffling (unless he ensures he is re elected)...
- different elections are grouped together over the same period, to lower costs, reduce the security burden and encourage more of the population to participate in the vote.

The very high level of international aid also raises the question of the viability of the Afghan state. According to the World Bank⁴², international aid for Afghanistan (\$15.7 billion in 2010) represents approximately all of the country's GDP. Civilian aid accounts for \$6 billion; the remainder is earmarked for security-related expenses (mainly to finance the ANSF). This level of dependence on international aid is almost unheard of — only small entities, such as Liberia and the Gaza Strip, have sometimes received more aid per capita than Afghanistan.

Of this \$15.7 billion, only \$1.9 billion is spent "on-budget," that is, through the Afghan budgetary process; the rest is spent directly by donors. The World Bank has pointed to another problem associated with dependence on international aid: the Afghan

(40) The bank was founded in 2004 by Sher Khan Farnood, an international poker player. Among its owners are one of President Karzai's brothers, Mahmood Karzai, and one of Vice President Mohammad Qasim Fahim's brothers. It paid 80% of civil servant salaries (in particular for the army and police). The banking institution was split into two entities, one of which was placed under the control of Afghanistan's Central Bank at the end of 2010, after nearly going bankrupt following the misappropriation of funds by its senior executives.

(41) The Kabul Bank scandal caused the International Monetary Fund (IMF), followed by certain donors, to suspend the payment of several hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to Afghanistan. In return for the resumption of aid, the IMF demanded that the bank be privatized again and that its former owners be tried.

(42) *Afghanistan in Transition: Looking Beyond 2014*, World Bank, May 2012, <http://www.worldbank.org.af/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/AFGHANISTANEXTN/0,,contentMDK:23052411~menuPK:305990~pagePK:2865066~piPK:2865079~theSitePK:305985,00.html>

civil service is based in large part on what is called the “second civil service,” i.e., national and international consultants working in the administration in parallel, paid directly by international institutions at much higher salaries than the Afghan average⁴³.

While the World Bank acknowledges that there has been a noticeable improvement in the lives of the Afghan people over the last ten years, the level of international aid has at the same time increased wastage and corruption, and strengthened the dependence on aid and parallel systems in order to circumvent the Afghan government’s quite limited ability to “absorb” the floods of money. Moreover, with international aid expected to decline in conjunction with the troop withdrawal and the economic crisis raging in a majority of donor countries, the World Bank expects a budget deficit of 25% by 2021-2022, peaking at 40% in 2014-2015. These are the challenges the Afghan government and the international community will have to contend with in the Transition (until 2014) and the subsequent Transformation (2015-2025) periods.

For the international community, the main challenge is to develop a new plan for the post-withdrawal period

The announced withdrawal of the ISAF troops requires that the international community more clearly define its post-2014 objectives, at both the security and political level.

At the security level, the coalition forces are well into the Transition phase, which involves transferring security to the Afghan forces. Thus, starting in 2013, the majority of operations will be led by the ANSF, not by ISAF troops, which will be limited to a support, training and advisory role. However, there is some question as to whether the Afghan forces are capable of ensuring the country’s security. They

will have to continue to receive support for “training, equipping, financing and capability development,” as pledged by members of the Alliance at the Chicago Summit in May 2012⁴⁴. Discussions are under way on the structure of the allied forces’ mission after 2014 — one of the scenarios would be the deployment of Afghan forces, which would control the territory (until now this has been the ISAF’s role), and the presence of a few external countries (the United States in particular), which would conduct special, sophisticated operations as part of the war on terrorism. However, the issue of the level of donor contributions has yet to be settled.

At the political level, the transfer of responsibility requires that the Afghans immediately become more involved in the country’s reconstruction and government, at the local and national level. Better coordination and use of international aid, institutional developments (for example, a move toward greater decentralization or better integration of civil society) and an agreement between the parties concerned, as part of a regional negotiation process that includes all the parties concerned, are essential to the success of the Transformation phase set to begin in 2015.

What role will the Taliban play ?

The other challenge is that of negotiations with the Taliban. The coalition has grappled with this problem for more than ten years, without knowing how to resolve it. The two Bonn conferences (2001 and 2011) thus did not yield any decisions on how to include the Taliban in the political process. While the international community did ultimately acknowledge that stability in Afghanistan could only be achieved through a “national reconciliation” between the Taliban and the Afghan government, this process has now broken down. The principle of talks has been accepted but there are numerous

(44) NATO site: “NATO Summit sends strong message of commitment to Afghanistan,” May 21, 2012, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_87601.htm.

obstacles: the Taliban are willing to discuss peace with the United States but not reconciliation with the Karzai government, which they view as illegitimate — as the assassinations of former President Rabbani, head of the High Peace Council, on September 20, 2011, and of Senator Arsala Rahmani, on May 13, 2012, attest. In addition, the Tajik, Hazara and Uzbek ethnic groups (located mainly in the northern part of the country) fear that the reconciliation process will come at their expense, re-establishing Pashtun hegemony.

Discussions between the United States and the Taliban, in particular with respect to the opening of a “Taliban political office” in Qatar, remain fragile: the Taliban decided to break off peace negotiations with the US government on March 15, 2012 as long as the prisoners held at Guantanamo have not been freed. But this decision can also be explained by their rejection of a trilateral dialogue with the Kabul government, which the United States would have liked to include. In fact, the United States is also being pressured by the Karzai government — as demonstrated by the lengthy negotiations before the signature of the strategic partnership agreement between the two countries on May 2, 2012. The Afghan government increasingly objects to direct contacts between the Americans and the Taliban, from which it feels excluded. This exasperation is fuelled by the feeling that it is being exploited by the Americans, in a region the Afghans know to be strategic, for both its regional environment (Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China) and its mining and hydrocarbon resources.

Is Afghanistan becoming a narco-state?

Poppy production plays a very unique role in Afghanistan: the country produces more than 90% of the world's opium and 10% of the Afghan population is involved in this narco-economy, whose export brought in more than \$3 billion in 2008 (i.e., 25%

of GDP that year), according to UN estimates⁴⁵. The narcotics trade is deeply entrenched in the rural Afghan economy and several thousands of farmers are dependent on these revenues. In addition, this activity represents a major challenge for the security situation in Afghanistan, as it fuels crime and the insurgency and may well ruin efforts to win “hearts and minds” and promote the country's economic development. Furthermore, drug addiction is a real problem for at least one million Afghans (i.e., 8% of the population aged 15 to 64)⁴⁶, but also in Western Europe and Russia, where the Afghan products are primarily sold.

The Afghan opium trade is therefore an economic, security and health issue.

In an attempt to control this problem, which contributes to the country's instability, the members of the coalition have developed different approaches: eradication of poppy fields (but this can worsen the economic conditions of small farmers), and financial incentives to grow substitute crops (but the transition to food crops as a viable alternative to opium could take at least ten to fifteen years). The question of regulating and legalizing opium production in order to sell it legally on the international painkiller market has also been raised (but it is highly unlikely that this market would be able to sell the entire Afghan crop).

At the national level, the Afghan government included the fight against drug production and trafficking in Article 7 of the 2004 Constitution. Afghanistan's Ulema Council issued a fatwa (religious decree) on August 2, 2004, with a strict prohibition against growing, selling and using the drug⁴⁷.

But, against the backdrop of the economic recession and the reduction in international aid to Afghanistan, there is little motivation to forgo the cash generated by the poppy crop.

(45) Christopher M. Blanchard, *Afghanistan: Narcotics and U.S. Policy*, Congressional Research Center, August 12, 2009, <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL32686.pdf>.

(46) UNODC, *Drug Use in Afghanistan: A 2009 Survey*, 2010, <http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Studies/Afghan-Drug-Survey-2009-Executive-Summary-web.pdf>.

(47) “Afghanistan: UN anti-drug official hails new decree against narcotics,” *UN News Centre*, August 8, 2004, <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=11581&Cr=Afghanistan&Cr1=>

Under these circumstances, can Afghanistan be called a narco-state? In a corrupt state such as this, civil servants and senior political leaders clearly profit from trafficking revenues, and the collusion between political power and drug traffickers is pervasive.

For this reason, some analysts (American, in particular) no longer hesitate to look to the Colombian model (the so-called Plan Colombia, which has had mixed results) as a way out for Afghanistan⁴⁸. The two countries do in fact have some commonalities. They are two of the world's major drug-producing countries (opium in one and cocaine in the other), they are areas of conflict in which drugs play a major role, the rebel groups wreaking havoc across the land (Taliban and FARC) are largely financed by drug trafficking and enjoy the benefits of sanctuary, and their neighboring countries (Pakistan and Venezuela) play a role in supporting the insurgency.

But the comparison falls short for these two countries with very different political and economic structures, and nothing could be less certain than applying the formulas for Colombia (a more developed and structured country than Afghanistan) to Afghanistan.

CONCLUSION

Is Afghanistan the latest victim of Western hubris? The West wants it all, right now, and projects its own political aspirations and perceptions onto Afghanistan: establish the rule of law and promote peace, democracy, civil liberties and women's rights... But this is to forget, first, that the democratic learning process takes time: the Afghans say,

"You have the watch, we have the time." The foundations of the institutions certainly exist in principle (written Constitution, elected Parliament and President, political parties), but how can a viable state be built in ten years, when our own experiences show that this takes decades? Second, this does not account for the devastating consequences of this ethnocentric approach, which overshadows local culture and history and imposes an allegedly universal ideology and bureaucratic processes that are supposed to simplify the country's reconstruction.

Thus, despite the billions spent in more than ten years⁴⁹, the country's economic and social development has not materialized, for want of coordinated international aid and a prioritization of programs consistent with the Afghans' needs. This raises two questions:

- that of the effectiveness and viability of the international action in Afghanistan; and
- more generally, that of NATO's role in international crises and the illusory nature of nation building as the Alliance understands it. Could the operation in Afghanistan sound the death knell for a particular vision of the West's role in the world?

Because of the schedule, Afghanistan is central to the international issues and meetings of the coming months, from the Chicago NATO Summit (May 20-21, 2012) to the Tokyo Conference on the reconstruction of Afghanistan in July (where the main topics will be governance and development), from the Transition to the Transformation.

In any event, the international community has confirmed that it would like to continue to work with the Afghan authorities, people and security forces beyond 2015, under conditions that have yet to be defined. How many donors are still prepared to invest in Afghanistan, when their own resources are dwindling and public opinion shows increasing

(48) See, for example, Paul Wolfowitz and Michael O'Hanlon, "Plan Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, October 28, 2011, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/10/27/plan_afghanistan_colombia. Scott Wilson, "Which Way in Afghanistan? Ask Colombia For Directions," *The Washington Post*, April 5, 2009.

(49) The United States Government Accountability Office estimates that, since 2001, the American government has spent \$72 billion in Afghanistan (an amount that includes both security and development expenses). "Afghanistan's Donor Dependence," GAO-11-948R, *United States Government Accountability Office*, September 20, 2011, <http://www.gao.gov/htext/d11948r.html>.

weariness. And in what context, at a time when the differences within NATO as to the role, agenda and identity of the Alliance are growing more pronounced? What will the international community's strategic objectives be for the post-2014 period? Will it be possible to continue to finance the Afghan security forces if the Taliban regain power? What will the involvement of the neighboring countries be?

Ultimately, there is no knowing what will happen in the Kingdom of Insolence*, with its multiple,

volatile and often incomprehensible internal and regional dynamics. Afghanistan can only be stabilized and developed if, first, clear operational and strategic objectives are set and, second, the Afghan people and their government are allowed to take their country's future into their own hands and fully assume their responsibilities.

Let us hope that this experience is carefully analyzed by NATO and the rest of the international community, so as not to make the same mistakes again. ■

* Translator's Note: the title of Michael Barry's book on Afghanistan published in French (Le Royaume de l'insolence).

Afghanistan: The tale of a failure foretold

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