Afghanistan

The Realities of Peace-Building in a Failed State

By

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For those of you who have not had the opportunity of visiting Afghanistan, let me describe its geography to you. The outline of the country is somewhat like that of a ripe fig lying on its side with its stem pointing towards China. On the south and east, it borders Pakistan; on the west, Iran; on the north, the former Soviet republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Like Switzerland, it does not have a significant ethnic group it does not share with its neighbours. In the south and the east, the population is, as in the neighbouring Pakistan, Pashtun. The Pashtuns constitute 38% percent of the population. In the west and the north, the population is largely composed of the Persian- or Dari-speaking Tajiks, as well as Turkmens, and Uzbeks. The principal

language in the north is Dari. For the last 25 odd years, Afghanistan has suffered what amounts to a civil war between the the peoples living in the north and west of the country and the Pashtuns. The Talibans originated in the Pashtun heartland of Kandahar.

I had the pleasure of visiting Afghanistan for a few days in November and December 2004, not long after the Presidential election on 9 October, when, in spite of frequent terrorist attacks by the Taliban, the Afghans in large numbers streamed to the polls. Then, the American Ambassador announced that the Taliban was finished. At the same time, several well-placed sceptics quietly indicated that it was touch and go whether the Allies could defeat the Taliban. In their view, the Allies did not have enough forces to do more than contain the flow of insurgents coming in from Pakistan. They were concerned that if the struggle persisted, the foreign forces would wear out their welcome.

In the event, the sceptics have been proved closer to the mark than was the United States Ambassador.

To understand why, we have to put our efforts to create a viable democracy in Afghanistan in the context of other efforts at nation-building since the end of the Second World War.

The retired American diplomat, James Dobbins, who served as US Special Envoy for Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan has presented his study of the factors that have determined the success or failure of efforts of nation-building involving the US since Germany and Japan at the end of the Second World War, in an article entitled, **Nation Building**, **The Inescapable Responsibility of the World's Only Superpower,** which appeared in the **Rand Review** of Summer 2003. Among the conclusions that Dobbins has drawn from his study are:

- The most important controllable factor determining the success or failure of nationbuilding, more important than prior democratic experience, or the degree of economic development and social homogeneity, appears to be the level of effort, as measured in troops, money and time.

- Neighbouring states can exert a significant influence. It is nearly impossible to put together a fragmented nation, if its neighbours try to tear it apart.
- There is no quick fix for nation-building. None of the cases studied was successfully completed in less than seven years.

Let us now examine the Western effort in Afghanistan in light of James Dobbins' criteria. Unfortunately, Afghanistan has been one of the most under-resourced of all attempts of peacebuilding since the end of the Second World War. It is an axiom of peacebuilding that you cannot succeed in accomplishing any of the steps that are required to build a viable state, such as restoring the basic conditions necessary for human well-being, promoting economic growth, rebuilding the infrastructure, reforming the system of governance, unless you can first establish physical security. Yet it is in the area of physical security, where Western efforts in Afghanistan have been notably wanting. After the

defeat of the Taliban in 2001, the United States only committed 8000 troops to fight the remnants of the Taliban and al Qaida, while establishing international peacekeeping force of 4000 for Kabul. It largely left the rest of the country to its own devices. It counted on popular support, the services of the warlords' militias and the co-operation of the Pakistanis in preventing infiltration across the border to maintain order.

The US plan did not work. The Warlords encouraged the cultivation of opium. Public opposition to the warlords, especially in the south and east, which had earlier fuelled the seizure of power by the Taliban, now smoothed the way for the Taliban's resurgence in the Pashtun areas. Pakistani cooperation was only half-hearted and intermittent.

As a result, the level of violence shot up, especially in the South and the East. In 2005, the number of attacks on coalition forces and the rate of coalition fatalities were four times higher than they had been in 2002. Since last year,

especially in the Pashtun areas of the south and east of Afghanistan, the region where Canadian troops are based, the level of violence has doubled. The result of the upsurge in violence has been to render at least one third of the country ungovernable.

By 2004, at the time of my visit, the United States had had to raise its forces to 14 to 16 thousand, while NATO had increased the international contingent to 8000. At present NATO has about 18,000 forces, and the US about 20,000 in Afghanistan, while the Afghan National Army can muster about 26,000 men.

The US application of the Powell Doctrine, under which maximum force is used, even at the expense of higher civilian casualties to achieve objectives, has not helped popular support for foreign troops.

It is questionable whether even the current level of forces will prove sufficient. One has only to compare the size of the

forces of order in Afghanistan with those required in other peacebuilding operations in the past At present, the total number of all the forces of order, both foreign and local, even including the unreliable Afghan police, in Afghanistan only equals, according to the Canadian strategist, Colonel Gary Rice of the Conference of Defence Associations, about 3.5 persons per 1,000 of population. The American mathematician and military analyst, James Quinlivan of the Rand Corporation, has calculated that the number of forces of order required for maintaining order in conditions of instability can vary between four and ten. While the over-all ratio of the forces of order to the general population may be barely sufficient for the level of instability in most of the north and the west of the country it is not for the Pashtun areas of the south and the east, which are increasingly falling into insurgency. The ratio needed to put down an insurrection can be over 20. In Malaya during the emergency and in Northern Ireland during the troubles, the ratio was 20. In

Kosovo, it was over 25. On the other hand, in Kandahar, where the Canadians are based and where we appear to be facing an insurrection, the ratio of the forces of order to the general population is only 2.04; while in Helmand province, where the British are located, which also seems to be in a state of insurrection, the ratio is 3.4.

If, according to the experience of other nationbuilding exercises, the number of troops available in Afghanistan is inadequate for the purpose, the same can be said for the aid funds that the international community has allocated for Afghanistan. In the first two years of their intervention for peacebuilding purposes in Kosovo and Bosnia, the participating countries put into Kosovo 16 times and into Bosnia 26 times more money for humanitarian aid reconstruction and reform than they did in the corresponding period in Afghanistan. The amount of assistance allocated for Afghanistan was also below the per capita sums spent on assistance during a comparable period in East Timor,

Namibia, and even Haiti, which received three times as much. It is only this year that international assistance to Afghanistan has begun to approach what Afghanistan considers it needs. The problem has been compounded by the fact in many parts of the country, notably in the south and east, the assistance cannot be provided outside of local capitals because of the security situation. As a result, international donors have had little success in investing in the agricultural regions where the majority of the population lives. Nor have they have they been able to complete, with one exception, major infrastructural projects.

The lack of security and of development assistance in much of the country-side has contributed to the failure of international efforts to eradicate the opium crop. Since a policy of aggressive eradication of poppy crops was announced in the spring of 2004, the area under cultivation has doubled; since last year it has risen by 59%. Production has risen in the past three years by 69%, making Afghanistan

the source of 92% of the world's opium. The reasons for the bankruptcy of the current policy are not hard to find. The little success in developing other forms of agriculture means that the peasants have little incentive to give up the cultivation of poppies. As the Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid has remarked in an article in the New York Review of Books of 22 June, "The aid programs supposed to provide alternative livelihoods…are derisory when compared to what the opium smugglers offer. The best functioning programs to help the farmers are run by the drug smugglers who provide improved varieties of poppy seeds, fertilizer and better methods of cultivation…."

In addition, the lack of control of the countryside in the south and the east of the country means that eradication there cannot be made to stick. The Government has few means of enforcement. The Taliban have considerable means of coercion. The opium production in this area has increased to

such an extent that it is almost equal to that of the entire country in 2005.

Furthermore, a policy which does not offer adequate compensation or an alternative livelihood, and is moreover primarily directed against the little man, without rather than the kingpins, has created a resentment that has increased support for the Taliban. Finally, the lack of success of the campaign has enabled the Taliban to continue to finance their activities through the opium trade. Several observers have remarked that the poppy crop eradication programme is a factor in the strength of the insurgency in the south and the east. The Executive Director of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, Antonio Maria Costa stated on 2 September that the southern part of Afghanistan is showing dangerous signs of incipient collapse with large-scale drug cultivation and trafficking, insurgency and terrorism, crime and corruption. He has called on the Afghan government to

do more to root out corruption and arrest major traffickers and wealthy landlords.

James Dobbins' third conclusion was that it was nearly impossible to put together a fragmented nation, if its neighbours tried to tear it apart. This brings us to the questionable role being played by Pakistan. As it now is, there is increasing evidence:

- that in Pakistan's religious schools or madrassas Afghan and Pakistani youth are being indoctrinated to join the Taliban;
- that Taliban fighters are being trained in Pakistani camps set up to train guerrilla fighters in Kashmir;
- that they receive intelligence and direction from the Pakistani ISI, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate,
- that they find refuge from fighting in Pakistan;

- that the Taliban wounded are receiving treatment in Pakistani hospitals, and
- that the Taliban leaders are living undisturbed in Pakistani cities.

In order to understand why Pakistan has largely turned a blind eye to Taliban activities, we have to recall that:

- the Pakistani ISI, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, originally created the Taliban and backed its rise to power;
- that Pakistan has long viewed a friendly Afghanistan as critical to its survival since it gives Pakistan a greater strategic depth in any war with India;
- that Pakistan is concerned at the rise in Indian influence with the government of Hamid Karzai and the alleged support of Indian consulates in Afghanistan for rebels in Pakistan.

Nevertheless, Pakistan has responded to Western pressure to rein in the Taliban in the past. The fact that Western troops were able to contain the level of violence in 2004 to that of 2003 has been attributed to the increased vigilance of Pakistan in policing its border with Afghanistan. Now, as a result of extensive US pressure Pakistan may be prepared to to be again more co-operative. During his visit to Kabul on 6 September, President Musharraf of Pakistan stated that Afghanistan and Pakistan had to join hands to fight the common enemy of extremism being fanned by al Qaida and Taliban militants.

Pakistan is however not the only problem, According to Barnett R. Rubin, of the Council on Foreign Relations, all of the other neighbouring countries, - India, Iran, Russia, and the Central Asian republics – oppose the long term presence of the United States in Afghanistan. For this reason, they have not appreciated the conclusion by the United States with Afghanistan in May of last year of a Joint Declaration of

Strategic Partnership, which they have seen as an effort by the United States to maintain a permanent presence in the country. All these neighbours have funds to support their proxies, just as they did in the civil war in the nineties.

Confronted with these formidable obstacles to bringing peace and stability to Afghanistan, we may well ask what Canada should do.

I would suggest that bailing out is not an option.

In the first place, it would undermine the two fundamental pillars of our foreign policy since the Second World War: our commitment to collective security and our alliance with the United States. We should not forget that we have been in Afghanistan since the beginning in response to an unprovoked attack on our principal ally, the United States. Following the events of 11 September 2001, the right of the United States to defend itself was explicitly recognized by the United Nations Security Council. Furthermore, the North Atlantic Council determined that article V of the North Atlantic Charter applied, making the attack on the

United States was to be treated as an attack on all members. For us to renege on our treaty commitments would cause us to lose influence in NATO and the US and call in question the Ogdensburg Agreement of 1940 under which the two countries pledged to defend each other in case of aggression.

In the second place, withdrawing from Afghanistan would mean turning our backs on the considerable investments we have made in that country that have contributed to the approval of the constitution, the election of the president and the parliament, the de-mining of the countryside, the reintegration of refugees, the demobilization of ex-combatants, the reform of the justice system, the emancipation of women, the education of girls, the development of alternative livelihoods in agriculture, the establishment of a system of micro-finance for small-scale entrepreneurs, particularly women. We have so far spent almost seven hundred million dollars. We have pledged another 310 million.

We should bear in mind that, in many areas, our efforts, combined with those of our allies, have borne fruit. The most recent poll, taken at the end of last year, suggests that the overwhelming majority of Afghan public opinion outside the Pashtun region in the south, reject the Taliban. In the Pashtun areas, opinion is or was evenly divided. Equally large majorities in the country as a whole endorsed the presence of the US and the United Nations. At the same time, riots against the United States this year and last year in certain cities suggest that Afghan patience with the foreign presence is wearing thin.

It is, in my view, erroneous to believe that we can remove our military contingent and concentrate our efforts on aid and development. Our collective experience in Afghanistan has shown that aid and development cannot be successfully carried out without physical security. Our partners in Afghanistan would not appreciate it if we should ask them to protect us so that we could concentrate on the easy stuff.

In the third place, our abandonment of Afghanistan, would mean that we would be prepared to live with the consequences of a return to power of the Taliban:

- the surrender of Afghanistan to an oppressive mediaeval theocracy which could once again become a centre for terrorist activities,
- an encouragement for the forces of terrorism elsewhere.

If we reject abandonment as a solution, what should we do?

The first thing is to understand that the participating countries as a whole have not devoted sufficient resources, civil or military, to Afghanistan and that we all may have to increase them.

The second is to recognize that Afghanistan can be stable and secure only if it is well integrated into its region, both economically and politically. Achieving this goal will require sustained efforts:

- to de-escalate, and resolve the country's long-standing conflicts with Pakistan over relations with India, the border, ethnic issues, and transit trade,

- to insulate Afghanistan from any conflict involving Iran, and
- to respect the concerns of the neighbouring countries.

The third is to realize that the elimination of narcotics will take well over a decade, and crop eradication is a counterproductive way to start such a program. Foreign donors should support the Afghan government's long-term plan by developing alternative livelihoods for Afghan farmers. In the meantime we might consider buying the poppy crop and making it available for medicinal purposes.

Finally what is required is patience. Up until now I have not referred to the final conclusion drawn by Dobbins in his study of the factors determining the success or failure of nationbuilding: There is no quick fix. None of the cases he studied was successfully completed in less than seven years. We must be prepared to have patience with Afghanistan and remain committed for the long haul.