

Uncertain Afghanistan*

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The US-led military intervention in Afghanistan was originally intended to get rid of Al-Qaeda and eradicate its accomplice, the Taliban regime. Soon after, it was understood that political and societal stability could not prevail in Afghanistan without a comprehensive program of reconstruction and nation-building. The international community, notably NATO countries and the EU, were thus called to back that process by providing security guarantee to what would become the PRTs (Provincial Reconstruction Teams), as well as economic, financial and technical support. At first, the whole operation took place under a UN mandate, which was relatively easy to obtain since most nations recognised in the Taliban regime a threat to global security. UNSCR 1386 (December 2001) allowed the creation of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) with military assets and manpower borrowed from 18 countries. UNSCR 1510 (October 13, 2003) gave mandate to ISAF to operate everywhere in Afghanistan under the command of NATO. Initially ISAF comprised 9,000 personnel in a country the size of France plus the Benelux; in early 2008 they were about 43,000¹. In its early days, ISAF was responsible for providing a secure umbrella upon reconstruction activities; it is being now growingly caught into combating the Taliban which cannot be seen merely as “terrorists” since they are an integral part of the Afghan society. At

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¹ ISAF depends on NATO's Joint Forces Command Brunsum, as the operational command.

present, NATO officials are talking about maintaining a presence on Afghanistan for an indeterminate period of time. Something Western leaders would not have dared foresee at the time they started ISAF. When UK defence secretary John Reid sent additional British troops into Afghan province of Helmand, in April 2006, he did declare: “*We would be perfectly happy to leave in three years and without firing one shot because our job is to protect the reconstruction*”.

Indeed, Western involvement in Afghan affairs has put into motion complex internal and external dynamics that are now significantly impacting on the duration, the nature and the scope of Western objectives. The rationale of the Western intervention can no longer be assessed merely in relation with the sole eradication of the Taliban and the gradual instauration of democracy in a country which never experienced it. Indeed, Western engagement now encompasses different types of concerns mixing up together. Put it differently, who, how and why are we fighting in Afghanistan?

The argument that the international community fights terrorism in Afghanistan is partially persuasive. Combating Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan for the sake of preventing terrorism in Europe (“*the Hindu Kush is our first line of defence against terrorism*” as often mentioned by Western officials) is difficult to sustain in front of a growing sceptical Western public opinion. A former British Permanent Secretary in charge of Intelligence Security, Sir Richard Mottram, recently declared that there is a clear danger of over-emphasising the spectre of international terrorism, which could play to al-Qaeda's advantage and divide communities². In some European countries such as Spain and to a lesser extent in France, terrorism is also linked to violent movements such as ETA, a terrorist movement fighting for the independence of the Basque country. The greatest majority of jailed terrorists in both countries belong to ETA not to Islamists. Muslim fundamentalists, fortunately very few in numbers, that are prepared to commit acts of terrorism in or around Europe, are indeed already living in Europe themselves, they are European citizens. Even if a few have connections with networks outside the EU, notably in the Maghreb³, or in Pakistan in the case of the UK, most of them are “home-grown terrorists”, sons of the second or third immigrant generation. Those “freelance jihadists” may decide to act for reasons that are linked to subjective and religious factors related to their belief that Islam is being offended by the West in Palestine, Saudi Arabia, and broadly speaking in the Dar al Islam (land of Islam) more than to instructions sent by top Al-Qaeda leaders. At the same time, however, the presence of key Al-Qaeda leaders, including Ben Laden and mullah Omar, in or nearby Afghanistan, gives a rationale to maintaining a military pressure of a different nature

² “Globalisation and climate change are perils, says ex-spy chief”, Jamie Doward, *Observer*, December 16, 2007.

³ In early 2007, the Algerian terrorist group GSPC decided to be called “*Organisation d'Al Qaïda au pays du Maghreb islamique*”.

from that of ISAF such as special operations as well as the intensive use of Special Forces against the terrorist network or “surgical” aerial bombings.

The absence of a right understanding of the nature of the opponents met in Afghan provinces is symptomatic of a lack of a clear vision of what should be achieved in Afghanistan. Such imprecision is leading to growing difficulties in establishing the basis of Western action. Indeed, who are the opponents? Some Taliban, of Pashtun origin, with a mix of Uygur, Arab and Chechen fighters, are definitely connected with Al-Qaeda; some other groups are linked to Hezb-e-Islami Gulbuddin⁴ or the Haqqani network whose founder (Jalaluddin) was considered as a hero in the Jihad against the Soviets⁵; some others are “second and third tier” fighters such as bored youths or “mercenaries” combating for pays⁶; others could also be named “resistant fighters” – resistant against a foreign presence on their soil, which is an old tradition in a country where Pashtuns often use the same word for "Satan" as they do for "Briton"; finally, drug traffickers or gangs benefiting from the situation of chaos that exists outside Kabul. All of them, for different reasons, fight Western forces, as well as the Afghan army and the corrupt police forces. The consequences of confronting such a composite adversary are already there: according to US officials (for instance Neil McConnell Director of National Intelligence) the Afghan government controls less than a third of the country and the Taliban control around 10 per cent. The rest is run by tribal authorities. In brief, the Afghan people are free but civil war is rampant, Al-Qaeda is still operative and resentment against Western powers is increasing among the Afghan population. The reconstruction of the Afghan state is on a standstill⁷. After years of optimism Western powers are beginning to take the measure of the crisis as mentioned by the Australian minister of Defence, Joel Fitzgibbon: “*we are winning the battles and not the war, in my view. We have been very successful in clearing areas of the Taliban but it's having no real strategic effect*”⁸. The West is being misled in ignoring that the Taliban have so far been successful in transforming the nature of the war in Afghanistan as a Jihad against non-Muslim forces⁹. Such worrying conditions are felt in various European countries with dramatic consequences. Asked if the war against militants in Afghanistan has so far been a success or a failure, 63% of the French and the British,

⁴ HiG was created in 1979 to fight the Soviets. On those various movement see: “Winning in Afghanistan: How to Face the Rising Threat”, Anthony H. Cordesman, CSIS, Washington, December 16, 2006.

⁵ In two different occasions in March 2008, two missile attack from US controlled UAVs were launched against houses located near the city of Lawra Mundi in North Waziristan, suspected to be safe houses of the Haqqani network. One son of Jalaluddin, Sirajuddin, is considered to be at the origin of different suicide-attacks that have struck Western forces in Afghanistan.

⁶ “Helmand chief seeks talks with Taliban”, Jon Boone, *Financial Times*, March 20, 2008.

⁷ In Kandahar, there are only four hours of city power every two or three days. See: “Kabul business choked by fear and corruption”, Jon Boone, *Financial Times*, April 8, 2008.

⁸ *The Australian*, December 16, 2007.

⁹ On this issue, see: “L’OTAN en Afghanistan: l’avenir incertain du Titanic”, Gilles Dorransoro, article to be published in *Annuaire Français de Relations Internationales 2008*, Ed. Bruylant (Brussels) and La Documentation Française, Paris.

66% of the Italians and 69% of the Germans think it has been a failure¹⁰. In early April 2008, according to a public opinion poll, 68% of the French population opposed president Sarkozy's plan to send additional French troops to the East of Afghanistan when only 15% were in favour¹¹.

How are we acting in Afghanistan? Confusion and lack of efficient coordination among actors on the Afghan scene have led to a situation of "organized anarchy" with direct consequences on the relationship between the Afghans and their Western and international mentors. At the political level, divergences on means and goals are rising between president Karzaï and its Anglo-Saxon allies. In a sign of defiance, in December 2007, the Karzaï government expelled a British diplomat, Mervin Patterson, member of the UN mission in Kabul¹². Later, in January 2008, at the occasion of the World Economic Forum in Davos, the Afghan president expressed reservations about initiatives taken by Western powers¹³. Almost at the same time, in an interview to *Die Welt*, president Karzaï questioned the necessity to increase the number of foreign troops in his country. He also vetoed the appointment of Lord Ashdown as the new UN representative in Afghanistan¹⁴ who expressed strong views about Afghanistan and what was at stake regarding British national interests: "*The consequences of failure in Afghanistan are far greater than in Iraq. If we fail in Afghanistan then Pakistan goes down. The security problems for Britain would be massively multiplied*"¹⁵. Ashdown could have worked efficiently to lessen the current state of "organized anarchy" in Afghanistan in becoming the sole representative of the international community by replacing both Tom Koenig (the present UN representative) and Dan Everts (NATO representative).

If discordant voices are heard between the Karzaï administration and Western powers, contradictory perspectives have been also growing within the Western camp. There are clearly different views on the nature of military operations aimed at winning "hearts and minds" of the Afghan population. The Europeans tend to advocate a more indirect military mode of operation while the Americans are more inclined to frontal operations

¹⁰ Afghan Conflict Monitor, Vancouver, August 27, 2007.

¹¹ BVA-Sud Ouest public opinion poll, April 1st, 2008.

¹² On the same day, Karzaï expelled Michael Semply, an Irish diplomat, representative of the EU. Both men were accused of trying to build contact with Taliban chiefs.

¹³ Amid Karzaï then declared to journalists: "*There was one part of the country where we suffered after the arrival of the British forces. Before that we were fully in charge of Helmand. When our governor was there, we were fully in charge. They came and said, 'Your governor is no good'. I said 'All right, do we have a replacement for this governor; do you have enough forces?. Both the American and the British forces guaranteed to me they knew what they were doing and I made the mistake of listening to them. And when they came in, the Taliban came.*"

¹⁴ Instead, the UN appointed M. Kai Eide, a former Norwegian ambassador to NATO and special envoy of the UN to the Balkans.

¹⁵ "Failure in terror risks rise in terror, says general", Nicholas Watt and Ned Temko, *The Guardian*, July 15, 2007.

against the Taliban¹⁶. Differences do also exist among NATO allies between countries which feel they are bearing too much of the fighting and alliance members with imposed national caveats either on their troops' location or on their ability to take part in combat missions. Such divergences have had negative fall-out between soldiers and officers of various allied forces, a situation that has left deep scarves between those fighting in the south and the others. Such divergence of opinions reached the political level when, in an interview to the *Los Angeles Times*, Robert Gates, US Secretary of Defense, declared that NATO forces lacked the knowhow to combat the guerrilla being pursued by the Taliban¹⁷. In the military field, successes against the "rebels" are occasionally achieved by using disproportionate means with collateral damage and civilian casualties¹⁸. A growing number of complaints are made that US forces are, sometimes, acting in such a manner that they fuel the rebellion, eroding Afghan support to foreign troops. Even allies are worried: British officers have reported that, occasionally, US Special Forces (which depend on their own regional chain of command, located in Bagram) are heavyhanded in their approach to the civilian population. All Western nations have signed and ratified conventions that prohibit killing civilians to attain military objectives, however civilian casualties among Afghan population are increasing, producing resentment to a point that in early May 2007, after 50 civilians lost their lives due to a combat between US troops and "militants", the office of Hamid Karzaï issued a communiqué which stated that "*the patience of the Afghan people is wearing thin with the continued killing of innocent civilians*". Thousands of civilians have died as a result of such combats inducing hostility to "occupying" forces and a desire for revenge that bring "militants" to harass Western troops. Indeed, those opponents are no longer solely "terrorists", "militants" or "Taliban", they are all that at the same time and ultimately they are Pashtuns with their own code of honour. This is a side-effect of the military logic which favours increased reliance on air support, as a result of which, more than occasionally, the civilian population which provides shelters for the Taliban suffers casualties. In the meantime, drugs are turning Afghanistan into a 'narco-state.' Drug trafficking constitutes the main source of financing for the guerrillas directed by the Taliban. Unless a global strategy is adopted to combat it, the country will continue to sink into violence. Afghanistan is

¹⁶ A French officer (from the mountain troops) serving in Afghanistan illustrated this difference of attitude with the following example. As member of an OMLT, with his French team he "accompanied" an Afghan battalion to secure a valley where an American convoy was arriving. The French officer led the battalion to occupy the heights of the valley from which hostile movement could be observed and attacked. A group of "fighters" was spotted ready to ambush the convoy. The Americans did not take into account warnings. Instead of letting the ANA attack the "insurgents" from the heights they went through the valley where IED destroyed some vehicles and stopped the convoy.

¹⁷ "Gates faults NATO forces in Southern Afghanistan", Peter Spiegel, *Los Angeles Times*, January 16, 2008.

¹⁸ As a recent example of collateral damage see: « Des autorités provinciales afghanes dénoncent une « bavure » occidentale », *Le Monde*, April 9, 2008. During an operation in the Nuristan (East of Afghanistan) about 30 civilians have been killed during a military operation, according to Afghan sources.

estimated to supply more than 90 per cent of the world's illegal opium, and the main provider of heroin from Iran to Western Europe. According to UN estimates, poppies were cultivated on an estimated 193,000 hectares last year, 17 per cent up on 2006. The opium harvest jumped 34 per cent last year to an estimated 8,200 tonnes¹⁹. So far, however, it has been impossible to define a unified Western attitude to fight this plague.

The Taliban lack the strength to seize and hold urban centres, but have enough military capability to keep allied forces bogged down, especially in the south where, unfortunately, they remain able to inflict losses to the British contingent: during the years 2003-2005 Britain had 9 soldiers killed; since 2006, 100 have been killed and about 1000 injured²⁰. "Insurgents" are bringing new ways of harassing US and ISAF forces as well as the Afghan army by borrowing from the Middle East the technique of suicide attack. In that sense there is a sort of "iraqisation" of the conflict. According to a recent UN report, "*While the very first suicide attack occurred on 9 September, 2001, when Al Qaeda suicide operatives posing as journalists assassinated Ahmad Shah Massoud, suicide bombings only came to prominence in Afghanistan in mid-2005. Only five attacks occurred between 2001 and 2005, when they escalated unexpectedly to 17 attacks that year. In 2006 there were 123 actual attacks, and in 2007 there were 77 attacks between 1 January and 30 June. Suicide missions now form an integral part of the Taliban's strategy*"²¹.

The nature of the reconstruction process also affects relations among Western powers as well as with the Afghans. Growing signs of cultural misunderstanding between Westerners and Afghans are visible. It has been emblematically illustrated by too many Westerners (outside the NGOs world) animated by good will that, however ignored the habits and customs prevailing in Afghanistan and has behaved in manners which contributed to harm the reputation of the international community as a whole²². Such a blurred picture has created a situation where neither Western powers nor their opponents can win. To definitely win would suppose in the end to police the FATAs (Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan²³) and parts of the Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP),

¹⁹ "UN Alarm at Spread of Afghan opium", Stephen Fidler, *Financial Times*, March 5, 2008.

²⁰ "The high cost of fighting a losing battle", Linda Bilmes and Joseph Stiglitz, *Financial Times*, 19 March 2008.

²¹ "Suicide Attacks in Afghanistan", a report from the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan, September 2007.

²² On the overall issue of Westerners and Afghans, see: "La galère afghane : état des lieux", René Cagnat, *Revue Défense Nationale*, May 2007. Cagnat is a retired colonel from the French army; he has worked on Central Asia issues for many years. He currently lives in Kyrgyzstan. It should also be noted that international aid to Afghanistan is largely diverted, with 40% "going back to donor countries in corporate profits and consultant salaries". "Afghan aid 'wasteful' and ineffective", Jon Boone, *Financial Times*, March 25, 2008.

²³ The tribal areas are divided into 7 agencies: Khyber, Kurram, Orakzai, Mohmand, Bajaur, North and South Waziristan. Most of the tribes, like the Shinwaris (Khyber agency), have economic interests on both sides of the Afghan-Pakistani border. Half of

a vast reservoir of fighters²⁴. In the 1980s, in this specific Area, the Pashtun tradition has been broken: the population was “Islamised” for various reasons related to Pakistan internal and external policies (Pashtun nationalism was, then, seen in Islamabad as dangerous). It was also meeting the increased demand for fighters participating in the Jihad going on in Afghanistan against the Soviet presence. At that time, such an evolution benefited from the support of the US. But it has had dramatic consequences²⁵. A significant number of young men were radicalised. When coming back from Afghanistan, they enjoyed prestige and no longer accepted the rules of the dominant Pashtun families and refused to remain their subordinates. Then, gradually, the authority shifted from *Malik* (traditional chiefs of tribes) and administrators sent by Islamabad to Islamists, the Taliban, as it has been the case in South Waziristan²⁶ with Baïtullah Meshud, an Islamist chief, or with the already mentioned Haqqani network. Tribal areas account for the highest concentration of madrassas in Pakistan and the more Western powers are perceived as struggling against Islam, the easier it becomes to recruit numbers of “fighters”, some of them being obviously manipulated or close to Al-Qaeda. The porosity of the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan is also illustrated by the fact that most senior leaders of the Taliban fighting in Afghanistan are based in the two Pakistani cities of Quetta and Peshawar.

This harmful climate has already had internal political fall-out among ISAF member states. For example, the pressures exerted on Italy to maintain its troops in Afghanistan led to a political crisis in Rome, paving the way to the dismissal of the government²⁷. Such a climate reflects a more profound and disturbing fact that no ally wishes to make explicit: the same causes produce the same effects; the demands to increase forces in Afghanistan come from those same countries which were embarked on a tragic mistake in invading Iraq. On the other hand, the Allies, which are more than sceptical on the issue of the Afghan war but who do not want to antagonize Washington after the dramatic legacy of the Iraq crisis will probably continue to do the bare minimum to participate to “stabilisation” in Afghanistan.

the population in the tribal areas lives outside. Immigrants go to Pashtun areas or to cities like Karachi (the greatest Pashtun city in Pakistan, where 300,000 new settlers arrive each year) or even Dubai.

²⁴ “Les incertitudes pakistano-afghanes”, General (ret.) Alain Lamballe, *Revue Défense Nationale*, November 2007. General Lamballe is a former defence attaché in Pakistan; he has maintained close ties with some Tribal areas’ chiefs.

²⁵ “L’Afghanistan, Al-Qaeda et la frontière pakistanaise: la “talibanisation” de la frontière en marche?”, Mariam Abou Zahab, CERI-ScPo, Paris, « Crises en Asie Centrale : Afghanistan et Pakistan », conference organised by FRS, Paris, February 14, 2008.

²⁶ The huge majority of suicide attacks come from individuals sent from Waristan. See: “A report on a NATO supported visit to Afghanistan and Pakistan (16-26 October 2007)”, unpublished report, Professor Julian Lindley-French.

²⁷ The Prodi government resigned after a vote of defiance when, on February 21, 2007, his coalition’s partners refused to vote in favor of maintaining Italian troops in Afghanistan and the extension of the US Air Force base in Vicenza.

Perspectives

In order to give new impulsion to what the Western powers could achieve in Afghanistan news perspectives should be explored:

1- The whole strategy of Western powers in Afghanistan has to be reassessed; military force cannot prevail in Afghanistan. Therefore, the issue is not about a dilemma between NATO failure (and withdrawal from Afghanistan) or a lasting reinforcement of troops. There are obviously political solutions to be sought for which it may be necessary to seek for a new coalition of political forces existing in Afghanistan, including the moderate Taliban. In that perspective, the next International conference on Afghanistan to be held in Paris on June 12, 2008 should led to a new approach of the Afghan problem: the financial international aid promised during the London conference (2006) of about 8 Bn€ should be renewed in the framework of a comprehensive approach in which all the parties at the conflict (with the exception of terrorists linked to Al-Qaida) should be helped to find a political solution.

2- In EU countries, reality and not propaganda should be presented to public opinions if one wants to transform general scepticism into moderate support in case there is a need to prolong the stationing of Western forces in Afghanistan.

3- New benchmarks, few in number but easily understood, should serve as yardsticks to various ISAF/UN/EU/US activities in Afghanistan.

4- As a lesson drawn from the Afghan situation, NATO's end states directives should be reviewed. The idea that systematically, whatever be at stake when NATO is involved, "the perpetuation of the cohesion of the Alliance should be preserved" should be reconsidered. It gives the sense that the concept of preserving the unity of the Alliance is becoming an end in itself (superseding the specific issues at stake in Afghanistan) as well an instrument of pressure against reticent allies. It is highly detrimental to NATO image.

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