

THE DIFFICULT STABILIZATION OF AFGHANISTAN

The situation in Afghanistan has deteriorated in recent months. While the Taliban and al-Qaida have re-formed in the tribal areas on the Afghan-Pakistani frontier, the Afghan government has been unable to increase its tenuous domestic legitimacy, and the drug trade is booming. It is proving extremely difficult to bring about a sustainable stabilization of the country, which would require the international military engagement to be complemented by a more constructive attitude on the part of Pakistan, economic investments in the Afghan-Pakistani border areas, and political reforms in Afghanistan.



Reuters/Abdul Qodus

Roadblock after a suicide attack on NATO troops in southern Afghanistan, 13 March 2007

The stabilization of Afghanistan is a key security policy challenge for the international community and its efforts to fight terrorism in a sustainable manner. If it should fail, the states of the West might become reluctant to participate in international crisis intervention and peace support operations. Furthermore, large consignments of heroin would continue to be shipped from Afghanistan to Europe. Conversely, a sustainable peace would also – and primarily – benefit the Afghans themselves, who are now experiencing their third decade of warfare and whose country has often been instrumentalized by external actors for their own purposes.

More than five years ago, the US toppled the Taliban regime and pushed members

of al-Qaida out of Afghanistan, and the international community has taken on the obligation to rebuild the country. The challenges to stabilization still remain significant, however. The fundamentalist Taliban who ruled most of Afghanistan from 1998–2001 have returned as a force to be reckoned with. Together with local rulers, drug dealers, and the equally resurgent al-Qaida, they are waging an asymmetric war against the Afghan government and the foreign troops in the country. The influence of the government of Hamid Karzai, elected in 2004, is weakest in the south and east of the country, where it has only very limited control. The Pashtun who dominate these areas represent 40 per cent of the population in Afghanistan, making them the country's largest single ethnic group; however,

since the US invasion and the subsequent redistribution of power, they feel discriminated against. Also, most of the Taliban are ethnic Pashtun. But there are also attacks and kidnappings in the more quiet northern and western areas of the country that are inhabited by ethnic Persian and Turkic populations. Overall, more than 4,000 people were killed in the conflict during 2006. This number includes not only insurgents, Afghan security forces, foreign troops, reconstruction workers, and journalists, but also a large number of civilians. Violence is both a cause and an outcome of the disparate economic development in different parts of the country. The national budget of Afghanistan, one of the world's poorest countries, is almost completely (92 per cent) externally financed.

Instability factors

A number of factors have complicated the stabilization of Afghanistan. In terms of domestic policy, in addition to the complex structure of this 30-million multi-ethnic state, the main problem consists in the rampant nepotism and corruption that President Karzai has accepted in order to secure his power. Furthermore, on the national level, the political integration of former warlords, who undermine democracy and human rights and enjoy little trust among the population, has proven counter-productive. While such a strategy may offer short-term successes in terms of stability, the price is a long-term loss of legitimacy on the part of the government.

Another problem is the Afghan economy's lopsided focus on the opium and heroin trade: Afghanistan produces more than 90 per cent of the world's raw opium as well as large quantities of heroin.

The regional environment has also prevented successful peacebuilding efforts. Progress in Afghanistan depends largely on the cooperation of Pakistan, but relations between the two countries are extremely tense. There are numerous indications that Islamabad is helping insurgent groups in Afghanistan to operate from the provinces across the Pakistani border. For instance, the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) service is alleged to have supported the Taliban leadership in Quetta, the capital of the Pakistani province of Balochistan. However, Pakistani leader General Pervez Musharraf has denied these charges, pointing to his successes in combating militants in the remote Pakistani-Afghan frontier provinces.

Other factors obstructing regional stabilization are the Pakistani-Indian rivalry and the struggle between Islamabad, New Delhi, and Tehran for influence in Afghanistan. For example, Pakistan has accused India of trying to enhance its regional clout by supporting infrastructure projects in Afghanistan and by backing groups that are fighting against the government in Islamabad.

As far as the general international framework is concerned, the stabilization of Afghanistan has been impeded in particular by the occupation of Iraq. On the one hand, this conflict has been tying down troops and funds that are urgently required in Afghanistan. Since 2003, the struggle against terrorism in Afghanistan has been overshadowed by the insurgency in Iraq. On the other hand, there are indications that insurgent groups in Iraq may be in touch with their counterparts in Afghanistan, and the Afghan resistance groups have adopted a number of lessons learned in Mesopotamia. This is particularly true for tactics such as suicide attacks and improved bomb-making techniques. The number of suicide attacks in Afghanistan has increased from 27 in 2005 to 139 in the past year. Another negative influence on peace support efforts has been the stigmatization of Iran as part of an "Axis of Evil" in 2003. This move by the administration of US President George W. Bush ensured an untimely ending for the pragmatic cooperation between Iran and the US in Afghanistan immediately after the 2001 invasion.



Afghanistan and its neighbors

The role of the international community

The international community is employing both military and civilian instruments to stabilize Afghanistan. The NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has now reached a force level of approximately 33,000 soldiers from 37 countries. It is legitimized by several UN Security Council resolutions. Security is to be provided by 27 civil-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams, which contribute to rebuilding the country. In addition, another 10,000 US and other foreign troops have been deployed that are not under ISAF command, but are tasked with fighting terrorists and insurgents as part of "Operation Enduring Freedom", which began in 2001. These are also engaged in training the approximately 25,000 troops of the Afghan armed forces. Overall, about 27,000 US soldiers are deployed in Afghanistan. In terms of troop contributions, the UK and Germany occupy second and third place, respectively.

A review of the military engagement in Afghanistan since the overthrow of the Taliban exposes two shortcomings: First of all, the UN has been pursuing a strategy of limited engagement (a "light footprint"). The intention was to generally leave stabilization and reconstruction tasks to the Afghans themselves. In doing so, the UN was primarily accommodating the position of the US, which was skeptical as far as nation-building was concerned. The international community's choice of limited engagement, together with the sub-

sequent prioritization of the Iraq war by the US, has had negative repercussions for reconstruction. After the military operations of 2001, the US relied on Afghan warlords and deployed only a relatively small contingent that was not expanded until a later date. The Europeans were also fairly slow to enhance their military deployment from 3,000 troops in 2002 to today's force level of 15,800 soldiers (from 23 EU member states). Accordingly, the Taliban and al-Qaida fighters were able to withdraw to remote and inaccessible tribal areas. Broad swathes of territory were left unoccupied by international forces, and must now be reconquered by them in painstaking operations. This made it easy for warlords, insurgents, and drug dealers to retain or secure their positions of power.

Secondly, even today, national caveats remain as obstacles to military stabilization efforts. For instance, Germany has provided ISAF with Tornado reconnaissance aircraft, but has declined to deploy combat units to the less secure areas of Afghanistan. European governments are under increasing public pressure to justify their engagement in Afghanistan. The US, on the other hand, demands that the Europeans make stronger military commitments.

It is true that efforts have been undertaken since 2001 in the field of civilian peace support. However, despite initial generous commitments, the financial engagement remained moderate compared to the response to the conflicts in Bosnia

and Kosovo, at least until the Afghanistan Compact that was announced in January 2006. The establishment of an efficient and democratically accountable police and justice system has been sluggish so far, which has made it difficult for the Karzai government to translate its formal legitimacy into domestic political clout. Many police forces are simply militias that are maintained by local potentates and exploit the population. At the economic level, attempts to reduce the one-sided dependence on the drug trade have proven extremely difficult. For many Afghans, cultivating opium poppies is the only viable business option.

The international community is further handicapped by a loss of credibility in the Afghan population. This is due to civilian casualties caused by the military operations of foreign troops, the low compensations paid out to victims or their families, reports of human rights violations at the US military base in Bagram and elsewhere, the distortion of the economic playing field through the presence of foreign personnel, and the lack of improvements in everyday life for the large majority of Afghans.

What next?

The experiences of the British colonial empire and of the Soviet Union underscore the limitations of military counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. The tactical successes of foreign and Afghan troops are thwarted again and again by the asymmetrical strategy employed by militant opposition forces. Military operations are a necessary, but not a sufficient condition for stabilizing Afghanistan. The launching of spring offensives should therefore not detract attention from the overriding importance of political initiatives.

One important key to long-term stabilization is likely to be found at the diplomatic level. Sustainable progress will hardly be achieved unless efforts for conflict resolution are increasingly regionalized by involving Iran, India, and especially Pakistan. In the case of Pakistan, the US is confronted with the delicate question of whether to continue to support General Musharraf on the same scale (Pakistan has received approximately US\$10 billion in US aid since 11 September 2001). Washington's confidence in the ability and determination of the Pakistani leader to end the infiltration of rebel groups and militants into Afghanistan has been shaken. At the same time, the Bush administration fears that if the

secular Pakistani military regime should step down, conservative religious parties could seize power in the nuclear-armed country. Irrespective of the "Musharraf question", continued détente in Indo-Pakistani relations would significantly reduce the importance for Pakistan of the Taliban and of the strategic depth provided by Afghanistan.

In order to bring stability to the Pakistani-Afghan frontier provinces, it would be useful for the Afghan government to recognize the so-called Durand Line, the de-facto demarcation line between the countries that was created by the British Empire in 1893. It constitutes a border between Pashtun tribes, albeit only at a formal level, since the trans-border traffic of people and goods (including arms and drugs) is quite considerable. Acknowledging the border would make it easier, among other things, to deploy Afghan border guards. International investment would also be very helpful in these border regions, where poverty and illiteracy are inordinately prevalent. Trade agreements between Afghanistan and Pakistan, support for economic and social development, and the construction of roads and communication infrastructure are more promising than the militarization and mining of the Pakistani-Afghan border area as favored by Islamabad.

Importance of democratization

In Afghanistan itself, strengthening democratic structures and the rule of law is of paramount importance. The Taliban are winning support not because they have so much to offer, but because the government in Kabul has so little to offer. The international community should try to counteract the marginalization of the Afghan parliament, in particular by strengthening the country's party system. It is equally important to strengthen the hands of democratic actors at the local and regional levels. The struggle against corruption should initially focus on the police and the judiciary. The planned civilian ESDP mission agreed by the EU in February 2007 could help to enhance the efficiency and legitimacy of the Afghan police.

In view of the fact that the foreign armed forces will not be able to control the entire territory of the country in the foreseeable future, it would be worthwhile to examine the option of concluding agreements at the local and district levels. Such agreements are fragile, however, as evidenced by

the fate of the so-called Musa Qala Agreement. In September 2006, ISAF attempted to involve local Taliban forces in the stabilization process in one region in southern Helmand province. Fighting between ISAF and the local Taliban earlier this year terminated this attempt at locally negotiated conflict resolution, which had been regarded with suspicion from the very start by the US and parts of the Karzai government.

In the context of drug policy, the Europeans should convince the US not to transfer its failed policy of repression from South America to Afghanistan. Chemical spraying of poppy fields in Afghanistan would not only be ineffective, since it would only cause drug production to be displaced geographically. This strategy, which is favored by the US, would also prove to be counterproductive by prompting more farmers to join the Taliban. The key precondition for reducing the supply of drugs is economic recuperation. Alternative development projects can support the transition from opium poppies to other agricultural produce. Repressive measures are also required; however, they should not be directed against farmers, but against those who pull the strings in the drug trade, even if they have political influence.

Stabilizing Afghanistan is a long-term task that mainly requires an integrated use of political, military, law enforcement, and economic instruments as part of a networked security concept, as well as better coordination between the various institutions involved.

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