

The Reconstruction of Afghanistan: A Fight for Survival

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) that took over operations in the south of Afghanistan from the U.S.-led coalition faces a tough task. Although Afghanistan has made progress in building national political institutions in the past year, many issues remain problematic. Security has declined in many parts of the country, law and order are not well established, and narcotics are still the dominant element in the fragile economy. Donors need to put particular emphasis on crafting an effective approach to narcotics and policing. This summary focuses mainly on security issues in Afghanistan and is based in part on a NATO-sponsored trip to Afghanistan by CSIS's Ambassador Terecita Schaffer in June 2006.

The political structure: Afghanistan has never had a strong central government, and the state structure itself collapsed in the early years after the communist government fell. The election of a Parliament in September 2005, coming after Hamid Karzai's election as president, was thus an especially important milestone in Afghanistan's reconstruction as a state. The Parliament meets regularly and has been using at least some of its powers; it upheld confirmation of several of Karzai's proposed cabinet ministers.

Karzai is the dominant figure in the central government. By temperament, he is more of a consensus-builder than an authority figure. He is acutely conscious that many of the regional leaders have more power and presence on the ground than he does. His decision to pull a number of them into his cabinet is not surprising but has contributed to the perception in Afghanistan and abroad that the central government can be pushed around by determined warlords or clan chiefs. The central government's well-documented difficulty in delivering services, especially beyond Kabul, adds to this perception. This is particularly important because the Afghan state has been largely absent for decades, so delivery of services is the primary means of gaining broad popular respect.

Relations between the central and provincial governments present another challenge for Afghanistan. The provincial governments are far weaker than the central government and have less legitimacy. Furthermore, the boundaries be-

tween central and provincial responsibilities are unclear. As a result, a central government that walks on eggs in dealing with its own strong personalities is even more careful when handling the provinces.

Taliban revival: The past year has been increasingly violent in Afghanistan. The two weeks between May 17 and June 1 alone saw at least 372 deaths. In Kabul, long considered one of the most secure parts of the country, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) have become common. An accident caused by a U.S. military vehicle in late May and the days of rioting that followed led to as many as 20 deaths.

Much of the rise in violence has been attributed to the re-



Rangin Spanta, foreign minister of Afghanistan, spoke at CSIS on recent developments in his country. (Source: CSIS press office.)

surge of the Taliban within Afghanistan's borders, especially in their traditional strongholds in the south and southeast of the country. Taliban leader Mullah Dadullah claims to have 12,000 men under his command in the southern provinces of Kandahar, Helmand, Zabul, and Uruzgan, though NATO commanders dispute this number. In recent months, Dadullah and the Taliban have executed a blistering offensive in southern Afghanistan that has caused over 400 deaths. In mid-July 2006, Taliban forces briefly took control of the areas of Garmser and Naway-i-

Barakzayi in the Helmand province. Though they were quickly pushed out, they promptly warned that they would open “new fronts” where they would undertake “severe” action. The Taliban’s ability to resurface is a troubling sign for the Afghan government, which never established a firm grip on security in the first place.

Inadequate security forces: With growing insecurity throughout Afghanistan, the weakness of the government’s security institutions presents a particular problem. The Afghan National Army (ANA) is the strongest of these institutions, with a regular military training facility in Kabul under the command of a brigadier who had remained in the army during the years of communist occupation but opted out during the Taliban years. The United States, Britain, and France have had the primary roles in training the army and have established it on a nationally integrated basis so that units are ethnically mixed. The U.S. government in July 2006 announced it would be providing an additional \$2 billion worth of weapons and vehicles to the ANA in light of the growing Taliban insurgency. At about the same time, however, the Pentagon announced that it was scaling back its ultimate goal for the size of the ANA from 70,000 to 50,000. The ANA still has a long way to go to reach even the reduced goal, with only 36,000 trained and equipped soldiers. The public announcement of a decrease in the government’s ambition runs the risk of adding to the perception that the government is weak.

The state of the Afghan National Police (ANP) is even more troubling. As of April 2006, only 37,000 police had been trained and equipped. More disturbingly, there are widespread and persistent reports of corruption, extortion, and other unlawful behavior in police ranks. In the riots that took place in late May, for instance, members of the ANP were reported fleeing Kabul and even joining the rioters in some cases. In light of this unreliability, President Hamid Karzai dismissed 34 senior police officers, including Kabul’s police chief.

The police are organized on a regional basis, which means they are likely to have a close relationship with local power figures. Given the ANP’s ineffectiveness, the Afghan government has talked about reestablishing village militias, or what some are calling “community police,” to restore security in smaller towns. This sets up a potential conflict with the ongoing process of disarming and rehabilitating the local militias that flourished during the years of the communist government and the Taliban. Moreover, President Karzai’s appointments to the ANP have included several known warlords and human rights abusers.

Afghanistan’s war on drugs: In 2005, the U.S. State Department released a report that stated that Afghanistan was on the verge of becoming a narcotics state. The report

claimed that at the time, over 206,700 hectares of land were being cultivated for opium, a threefold increase since 2003. The report also estimated that poppy production accounts for 40–60 percent of Afghanistan’s gross domestic product. More recently, counternarcotics officials have estimated that production in Helmand, the country’s most fertile and irrigated area, will increase from 26,000 hectares in 2005 to 77,000 in 2006. Although the Taliban enforced a poppy ban during the last year or two of their time in power, there are now reports that farmers in these regions have received letters from Taliban insurgents threatening repercussions for the farmers and their families if poppy is not cultivated. The pervasiveness of poppy production in Afghanistan has far-reaching effects on not only the economy but also Afghans themselves. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime reports that 3.8 percent of the Afghan population is currently addicted to narcotics.

The government’s approach to the narcotics problem relies on a mix of crop eradication, interdiction of shipments, and helping farmers find alternative livelihoods. Britain is leading the international counternarcotics effort in Afghanistan. Responsibility for counternarcotics work, both within the Afghan government and by international donors, involves unwieldy bureaucratic structures that are especially difficult to manage in a country where the state has practically not existed for decades.



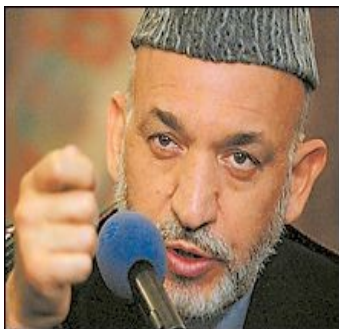
A NATO soldier patrols in Kabul, Afghanistan. (Source: AP newswire.)

Foreign military presence: International support for Afghan reconstruction is strong in principle but complicated and often late in practice. The foreign presence includes two distinct types of military units. The first is the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), mandated by the United Nations Security Council, which is responsible for security in Kabul and the northern half of the country. ISAF will extend its responsibility to the southwestern quadrant, centered on Kandahar, later this summer, and to the southeastern quadrant some months later. Within ISAF, different national contingents have different rules of engagement and different restrictions on their authority to operate, which complicates the task of commanding them.

The second type of foreign military unit in Afghanistan is the coalition military force, which operates outside the UN framework and works in the areas not covered by ISAF. ISAF and the coalition have different mandates and chains of command. In particular, the coalition has a more expansive view of its responsibility for narcotics and counterterrorism work.

In response to the growing turmoil in Afghanistan, the coalition is engaging in a broad strategic campaign, Operation Mountain Thrust (OMT), to eliminate the threat from Taliban insurgents, especially in the south. Thus far, the offensive has faced fierce resistance from the Taliban. Coalition officials have conceded that their efforts will not reap significant benefits in the short term but look to the coming months as a pivotal period when momentum should turn in their favor.

Tenuous regional relations: Besides all of its internal problems, the task of reestablishing a functioning and reasonably stable Afghan state depends on relationships between Afghanistan and its neighbors. The most complex relationship is with Pakistan. The two countries share a 1,400 mile border through rugged, mountainous terrain. Culturally, the Pashtun-dominated Taliban have much sympathy from the Pashtun areas of Balochistan and North-West Frontier Province in Pakistan. Many fugitive Taliban seek refuge in these areas.



President Pervez Musharraf has emphasized his government's desire for good relations with a stable Afghanistan. But there are persistent reports—and accusations from high-level Afghan officials—that Pakistan's intelligence services have not severed their

long-standing ties with some of Afghanistan's insurgent personalities, including the Taliban. In late July 2006, Pakistani police arrested more than 50 Taliban militants in Balochistan. If this is an indication of a new Pakistani policy, it will be much welcomed in Afghanistan and the West.

The economic dimension: A serious discussion of Afghanistan's economic problems would take more space than this paper permits. One of the poorest countries in the world, Afghanistan is able to fund only 18 percent of its government's expenses from its own revenues, the lowest rate in the world. Economics intersects with strategy in three ways. First, alternative options for earning a living are an indispensable element in reducing the dominance of narcotics in the country's economy. Second, five years af-

ter the fall of the Taliban, development aid is still one of the major assets the central government possesses, so economic development around the country is one of the Karzai government's principal ways of establishing its credibility. This was recognized in the February 2006 decision to establish a Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (JCMB), composed of Afghan and international officials, to monitor and manage how foreign aid is utilized. Third, the scarcity of good roads and the limited authority of the Karzai government outside Kabul significantly inhibit the country's economic development.

Moving forward: Afghanistan's foreign donors have been willing to pledge generous amounts of money. The United States, for instance, has given over \$10.3 billion between fiscal years 2001 and 2006. Nevertheless, implementation has proven difficult, and donors need to focus with some urgency on a small number of very difficult problems with huge strategic implications. These include establishing an effective counternarcotics program, including alternative livelihoods for those caught up in the drug trade against their will; creating an effective police force; and simplifying the very complex ground rules for foreign military forces in Afghanistan. Foreign donors also need to find ways to help the government increase its capacity to act effectively. Time is not on our side. The increasing insecurity in Kabul is a warning call, and the consequences of backsliding are dangerous indeed.

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