

Poppy seeds and dragon's teeth: NATO struggles with an opium-funded war in Afghanistan

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*We thought we were done with these things but we were wrong.
We thought, because we had power, we had wisdom.
We thought the long train would run to the end of Time.
We thought the light would increase.
Now the long train stands derailed and the bandits loot it.
Now the boar and the asp have power in our time.
Now the night rolls back on the west and the night is solid.
Our fathers and ourselves sowed dragon's teeth.
Our children know and suffer the armed men.*

- Stephen Vincent Benét (US), "Litany for Dictatorships", 1935

The armed men have returned in force to Afghanistan. On November 6, Afghanistan was shocked by the deadliest bombing in the country's history. The suicide attack occurred in the province of Baghlan, heretofore relatively quiet compared with the violent southeastern territory. The terrorist act killed at least 77 people, including a key opposition figure and five other members of Afghanistan's parliament, as well as, horrifyingly, 59 school children.

The attack underscored the spiralling violence that has frazzled nerves, disheartened and alienated the population, and undermined material and political progress in Afghanistan. It has also raised the question of whether the US-led military strategy in Afghanistan, which has short-changed political, economic and social reconstruction, has failed even to establish basic local security for the country, much less provided for long-term stability. The BBC News commented that, "it is a grim reminder that the underlying causes of the violence in Afghanistan have not been resolved, and the instability is likely to worsen still further".¹

The world's newspaper headlines have become increasingly ominous regarding the US' and NATO's efforts to stabilise and reconstruct Afghanistan. In October *El País* titled an article by an active duty general calling for a political solution: "Un conflicto enquistado. Afganistán: seis años y sin salida" (An entrenched conflict. Afghanistan: six Years and without an exit). In November there appeared this headline in *Der Spiegel*: "Over Half of Afghanistan under Taliban Control". In late November *The Washington Post* headlined "US Notes Limited Progress in Afghan War" and then informed readers that the White House had concluded that the "wide-ranging strategic

¹ Kroeger, Alix., "Many Questions Over Afghan Blast", BBC News, Kabul, 7 November 2007.

goals that the Bush administration set for 2007 have not been met". The article emphasised the pessimism of a recent report from the National Security Council and cited private comments from senior White House officials and intelligence agents who "worry about a looming strategic failure". The lead story of *The Sunday New York Times* in mid-December began by noting that the Bush administration and NATO are "deeply concerned about the prospect of failure in Afghanistan..."²

The reality of developments in Afghanistan since 2005 have mocked US assertions of success and the scales have finally fallen from the eyes of both the media and now some government officials. Today, even the initial tactical success of the US in toppling the Taliban regime has receded in significance in the face of a growing and dangerous insurgency. The dragon's teeth have sprouted on Afghan soil; the armed men have returned. The Taliban are resurgent inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan along the 500-mile border of tribal areas. Insurgents and foreign fighters from Arab countries, Central Asia and the Caucasus, the latter linked to Al Qaeda, are growing ever stronger in the border area, threatening the stability of Pakistan. In Afghanistan, these militants are engaging in suicide and roadside bombings, tactics that have so thoroughly shredded security in Iraq.

As recently as a year ago the military and humanitarian intervention in Afghanistan after 2001 was showcased by the Bush administration as a successful example of US determination and international cooperation. It emerged as a symbol of the accomplishments of the Bush administration's belligerent foreign policy - transforming a security threat into a functioning democracy. For a time even critics of the war in Iraq would cite Afghanistan as the place where the US had diminished the threat of terrorism from a failed state. However, the scenario was never quite so sunny as the overly optimistic commentary. From the start the US did not commit adequate resources, using what has become termed a "light footprint" for the first years after the 2001 invasion. After Washington turned its attention to Iraq in 2002-2003, Afghanistan slipped further off the US radar screen and subsequently suffered from inattention and neglect, a lack of troops and funding, and a narrowly-based military strategy.

Although NATO has recognised the deteriorating situation since 2006 and made Afghanistan a test of its credibility, only a month ago the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, told the House Armed Services Committee that Afghanistan "is by design and necessity an economy-of-force operation...Our main focus, militarily, in the region and in the world right now is rightly and firmly in Iraq... In Afghanistan, we do what we can... In Iraq, we do what we must".³ This makes it more difficult for Washington to convince the Europeans of its sincerity when it complains of the need for more NATO support in Afghanistan.

Divisions and criticisms of the Western military and reconstruction efforts also surfaced in Edinburgh, Scotland, at a mid-December summit of defense ministers from the eight NATO countries that have troops in Afghanistan in a combat capacity.⁴ Thirty-nine nations now contribute to the military effort in Afghanistan and the numbers of troops committed to the NATO-led International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF), rose last year from 33,000 to 42,000. Despite this support, strong and pointed words were directed at NATO allies who are perceived as shirking their military responsibilities in the insurgent-dominated areas of the south and east. The US has repeatedly called for more troops and equipment from its NATO allies, particularly helicopters.

Many Europeans felt that even though the US has provided the bulk of the money and troops in Afghanistan, it gave the country secondary billing compared to Iraq and contributed to the current crisis by pursuing a monolithic strategy. Now it is asking Europe to "pull its chestnuts

² Ayala, General José Enrique., "Hacia Una Solución Política", *El País*, 7 October 2007, *Spiegelonline*, 22 November; DeYoung, Karen., *The Washington Post*, 25 November 2007; Shanker, Thomas., and Meyers, Steven Lee, "Afghan Mission Is Reviewed as Concerns Rise", *The New York Times*, 16 December 2007.

³ CNN, Associated Press (AP), 11 December 2007.

⁴ Britain, the United States, Canada, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Estonia and Romania.

out of the fire". In part to allay those doubts, Secretary of Defense Gates announced in early January that the US will send 3,000 more troops to Afghanistan this spring. In any case, many Europeans believe it is imperative that their governments don't simply give the US a blank cheque in Afghanistan. NATO needs to consider the qualitative nature of its contribution and the manner in which the requested assistance will be used as well as discussing dollars or numbers. Above all, it needs to demand the creation of a strategic master plan to coordinate all dimensions of the international effort. As Mariano Aguirre has pointed out, while the US has called upon NATO governments to increase their forces, "it is necessary to ask if the only options are to send troops or withdraw them.... Before discussing the amount of such aid we must analyse a different use for it".⁵

Significantly, during this same weekend summit it was revealed that the Bush administration, in tandem with NATO, has pledged three separate "top-to-bottom reviews of its Afghanistan policies, with the goal of providing a coherent and integrated plan for coordination among the various actors there—both international and local". To that end a "super envoy" is being proposed to synchronise these efforts.

The gloom reflected in US and European government reports is supported by the depressing data coming from Afghanistan. The much heralded presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005 have not produced anything like the stability they promised. The past year was the bloodiest yet, in terms of the incidence of armed violence, since the 2001 invasion. Nearly 6,000 people, mostly militants, have died since January in insurgency-related violence, an increase of 40 percent in casualties and 20 percent in number of attacks over the previous year. There were 140 suicide attacks in a country that until 2003 had never seen them. The most violent province, Helmand, in the south, experienced a 60 percent increase in attacks. In the past year 232 international soldiers died in Afghanistan, 117 of them from the US, setting a record pace. From January to December it was estimated that perhaps 1,500 civilians lost their lives, and alarmingly, more died at the hands of NATO, US and Afghan government forces than were killed by the Taliban.

Wide use of aerial bombardment, a function of the underemployment of troops - is a prime factor in causing these civilian casualties. It is estimated that the US and NATO forces launched more than 1,000 air strikes in Afghanistan in the first six months of 2007 alone - four times as many as the US carried out in Iraq during that period.⁶ The use of this controversial tactic, which has incurred criticism from both the Afghan government and Washington's European partners, does not augur well for winning the classic counterinsurgency struggle for the hearts and minds of the people. Indeed, despite the intensified military campaign and Taliban battlefield losses, a recent report from the Senlis Council estimates that the Taliban now control half of Afghanistan's territory.⁷ A resurgence of the Taliban and the expansion of their geographic control is also the strongest argument against die-hard optimists who claim the increased violence and use of suicide attacks are a sign of the insurgents' desperation.

After six years of reconstruction and development aid, dwarfed by NATO and US military expenditures and often poorly administered, the results, not surprisingly, are disappointing. Afghanistan remains one of the poorest countries on earth. Illiteracy stands at 70 percent and unemployment hovers around 30 percent with another 30 percent underemployed, driving many youth into the arms of the opium-funded Taliban for economic, not religious reasons.⁸ A third of

⁵ Aguirre, Mariano, "Afganistán y la crisis pakistani", *La Vanguardia*, 15 January 2008.

⁶ Bergen, Peter, and Tiedemann, Katherine, "Off Target: Losing Afghanistan, One Civilian at a Time", *The Washington Post*, 18 November 2007.

⁷ The Senlis report also calls for a doubling of NATO troops. While some experts like Barnett Rubin of New York University think Senlis may have exaggerated the figure, there is no doubt that the Taliban have expanded and control a significant portion of Afghan territory. Nonetheless, after issuing caveats about the security map presented by the Senlis Council, Rubin concludes that "this report largely echoes what Afghans tell me in Afghanistan. Official statements issued by the US, NATO, and the UN do not." Rubin, Barnett, "Baghlan Massacre: The Teetering Half-Full Glass," Blog, *Informed Comment: Global Affairs*, 24 November 2007; see also Norton-Taylor, Richard, "Afghanistan 'falling into hands of Taliban'", *The Guardian*, 22 November 2007.

⁸ Sands, Chris, "Insurgency rises in Afghan province. Anger is fueled by unemployment," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 18 January 2007; Livingston, Kari, "Unemployment Pushes Afghanistan Youth to the Taliban," IWRP International Women's Rights Project (IWRP), Clout Index, 12 November 2007.

the country's GDP comes from the production of opium and heroin and government revenue will total only 5.4 percent of non-drug GDP in 2006, "less than any country with data", according to Barnett Rubin of New York University's Center on International Cooperation. In Kabul, which has grown from 500,000 to over three million in six years, less than 10 percent of residents have regular electricity or running water.⁹ The real possibility is emerging of a slow, long-term social and political meltdown in Afghanistan.

Another disturbing development is the escalating violence in neighboring Pakistan. Symptomatic of this was the October 18 suicide bombing attack which killed at least 136 people and wounded another 450 in Karachi during the home-coming procession of former Pakistani premier, Benazir Bhutto. As in the November 7 bombing in Afghanistan, it was the country's most deadly ever suicide bombing. It narrowly missed killing Bhutto, who encouraged by Washington, was returning to offer a moderate civilian and, it was hoped, democratic alternative to the increasingly autocratic regime of Pervez Musharraf. She had pledged to end military rule and fight Islamist extremism, beginning by leading her party in January's scheduled parliamentary elections.

But on December 27 her foes succeeded in their second attempt as Benazir Bhutto was killed by either gun-fire or a suicide bombing as she rode in an open-top vehicle a party rally. While the circumstances surrounding her tragic end are murky and under investigation, it is clear that Pakistan's moderate democratic opposition and its hopes for change have been dealt a devastating blow. And so has US policy in South Asia. Washington now appears to have no visible strategy to resolve the crisis in Pakistan or to deal with the rising tide of jihad extremists - a circumstance immediately complicating the war against the Taliban-led insurgency in Afghanistan.

Since 2001, the Bush administration cultivated the Musharraf regime as an indispensable ally in the war on terrorism. Consequently, over the last seven years Washington sought to buy Islamabad's loyalty in the battle against the Taliban and Al Qaeda with some \$10 billion in—mostly military—aid, earmarked for this fight. It was a tricky gambit from the start and has turned out to be wishful thinking on the US administration's part. There was bound to be foot-dragging - to say the least - by the Pakistanis in this bargain, given the Pakistani military and intelligence services' historic links to the Taliban and their ambivalence regarding militant jihadists. In addition, it has now been revealed that Musharraf and his political and military allies took the US for something of a ride with much aid going to support the military's own political agenda, graft and weapons systems aimed at India. One unnamed US military official said: "I was astounded.... On one side of the border we were paying a billion to get very little done. On the other side of the border — the Afghan side — we were scrambling to find the funds to train an army that actually wanted to get something done."¹⁰

It is therefore not surprising that violence in Pakistan has increased exponentially in the past two years. Al Qaeda and the Taliban are operating openly as never before in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan and even in Pakistan's major cities. Recent events in Pakistan have only cast into bold relief the tinderbox that the Islamic nation of 165 million is today. What *Newsweek* called in November "the most dangerous country on earth"¹¹ has become perceptibly more dangerous.

⁹ Rubin, Barnett, "Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition from Turmoil to Normalcy", CSR No. 12, Council on Foreign Relations, March 2006;

"Afghanistan: Kabul facing 'unregulated' urbanization", IRIN (Integrated Regional Information Networks) Report, 26 November 2007.

¹⁰ Rhode, David., Gall, Carlotta., Schmitt, Eric., and Sanger, David., "US Officials See Waste in Billions Sent to Pakistan," *The New York Times*, 24 December 2007.

¹¹ Moreau, Ron., and Hirsh, Michael., "Where the Jihad Lives Now," *Newsweek*, 29 October 2007.

The opium challenge

However, in one of the small signs that Washington may be coming to terms with its failures in Afghanistan, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has tacitly admitted at least one blunder: US counternarcotics strategy (or lack thereof) in that country. Poppy cultivation has mushroomed in the vacuum of security that the still weak national Afghan forces can do little to fill. It is also a testament to the failure of the US and NATO forces to handle the problem. Poppy cultivation set a world record this year at 8,200 tons, up 34 percent over the previous year's record harvest. (And nearly fourteen times the production of 2001) Three million Afghans contribute to a harvest worth \$4 billion - an amount equal to more than half of the country's legitimate gross domestic product. Afghanistan now accounts for 93 percent of world opium production and is the biggest narcotics producer since 19th century China .

The drug trade is undeniably fueling the Taliban insurgency. The four southern provinces of Helmand, Kandahar, Zabul, and Uruzgan are the main base and command center for the Taliban, the largest producers of opium, and entirely devoid of any signs of economic reconstruction or the presence of NGOs. The geographic centres of both opium production and the insurgency are the provinces of Helmand, where 7,000 British troops are stationed, and Kandahar, home to 2,500 Canadian soldiers. The insurgency batters on the farmer's poppy crop and in turn protects the expansion of drug cultivation in a precarious, but highly beneficial, symbiosis. It is not merely circumstantial that just these two conflicted provinces together produce more than 60% of Afghanistan's opium.¹²

From the beginning of "Operation Enduring Freedom" in 2001 Europeans have taken the drug issue in Afghanistan more seriously than the US. Opiates are still considered the recreational drug of choice in Europe, home to 3.3 million addicts, with Afghanistan providing practically the entire supply of heroin coming to the continent. Not surprisingly the US' NATO allies rightly criticise of US incompetence in addressing the problem for several years after the 2001 invasion. And there is much to complain about.

At first glance US mishandling of the resurgence in poppy cultivation seems almost as surreally inexplicable as an opium-induced pipe dream. As part of a quintessentially military strategy to remake Afghanistan, then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld cavalierly dismissed suggestions that the US military should address narcotics production and trade from the very beginning. In an exercise of willful neglect Rumsfeld opposed any military involvement in counter-narcotics operations as a dangerous diversion from fighting terrorism. Arguing that stopping drugs was a law enforcement job, not a military one, commanders said "we don't do drugs, we're just killing terrorists," according to Andre D. Hollis, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for counter-narcotics.¹³ Iraq cemented the case as it became the main front in the so-called global war against terrorism and, sadly, is still considered as such by the Bush administration. The war distracted attention from and diverted human and material resources to Iraq and foreclosed the possibility that the US would consider committing more troops to Afghanistan for counter-narcotics. It was another calamitous example of how the invasion and occupation of Iraq has distorted priorities and damaged US interests.

Additionally, even Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) officials could not do their work because of the lack of military protection in lawless and dangerous areas; on occasion they were openly thwarted in their efforts to root out drug corruption. This reckless disregard for the negative

¹² According to Interpol, Kandahar, the province Canadian soldiers are attempting to pacify, has the third largest opium crop in the country with 12,619 hectares under cultivation last year. It is right beside Helmand, which has a staggering 69,324 hectares of poppies. The opium production of Helmand in 2007 was higher than the entire opium production of Afghanistan in 2005 and of the next three poppy growing countries: Colombia, Morocco and Myanmar. "Afghanistan: Heroin producer to the world", CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) News, 5 July 2007.

¹³ Risen, James., "Poppy Fields Are Now a Front Line in Afghanistan War," *The New York Times*, 16 May 2007.

implications of the resumption and rapid expansion of opium cultivation raises the question of whether there were other motives for the Pentagon's attitude. Did Rumsfeld deliberately want to avoid alienating officials and warlords allied with the US, who were also engaged at some level in the drug trade?

When Rumsfeld resigned in 2004, there was an expectation that US drug policy in Afghanistan would now fall more into line with the European concern over the vertiginous rise in Afghan opium production, which was ending up as heroin in European cities. Indeed, one counter-narcotics agent, Craig Chretien, who was attached to the US embassy in Kabul, described it as a "sea change" in attitude among defense officials. The sea change, however, was in the quantity of attention given to the problem, not in the quality of the strategy. Similar to the US' blind faith in its overwhelming military power, it persisted in the belief that force and punishment would resolve the drug problem. The US continued to emphasise hard-nosed, even quasi-military eradication methods and to push for chemical fumigation of the plants. The short shrift given to alternative development schemes and the attendant corruption in selectively applying eradication methods assured that the post-Rumsfeld approach up until today has been counter-productive. Discouraged and alienated farmers have turned to the Taliban to protect cultivation and this has further delegitimised the government of Hamid Karzai and the international forces and donors.

Typifying the European/Canadian/Australian attitude, and in contrast to that of the US, NATO's supreme commander, the American general James Jones, is fond of saying that Afghanistan's main problem is drugs, not the Taliban. While this may be something of an exaggeration, there is now a consensus that without taking on the drug problem, containing the Taliban will be impossible.

That doesn't mean that the Europeans are blameless. In November 2001, shortly after British troops were first sent to Afghanistan, then Prime Minister Tony Blair promised that Britain would take responsibility for eradicating Afghanistan's poppy crop, particularly in Helmand province, where British forces were concentrated. The growth in the trade only highlights the failure of Afghan and British-led international efforts to tackle the problem in Southern Afghanistan.

Canada's position has been more ambivalent. Prime Minister Stephen Harper said Canada is militantly against both terrorism and drug trafficking in Afghanistan. But at the same time he has deliberately kept Canadian troops from joining the US eradication programme. The Canadians accept the need to address the opium-insurgency nexus but only after NATO secures these producing areas and, significantly, only in tandem with a viable programme offering alternative cash crops. This is essentially NATO's position.

Washington still supports a vigorous eradication programme; the official US position in fact calls for ratcheting up the effort this year - especially in the Taliban-controlled areas of the southeastern region.¹⁴ Critics continue to argue that US stubbornness on this issue will not reduce poppy cultivation overall and will only benefit the insurgency.¹⁵ However, the Bush administration has been divided on the issue of chemical fumigation of the poppy crop with counter-narcotics officials at the State Department and the White House backing the fumigation programme while Congress, the CIA and Defense Department mainly oppose it.

Now, however, Washington seems finally to be hearing the other NATO members' point of view, or at least as it is reflected in the Karzai government's opposition to spraying. In fact, there may be an emerging consensus among all NATO members that at least for the time being aerial

¹⁴"US Counter-narcotics Strategy for Afghanistan", Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, US Department of State, August 2007.

¹⁵Rubin, Barnett., "Erroneous Talking Points on Opium Poppy Crop Eradication in Afghanistan", Blog: *Informed Comment: Global Affairs*, 12 January 2008.

spraying with herbicides in Afghanistan is politically and militarily counterproductive to the goals of rolling back the insurgency and legitimising and extending the writ of the Afghan government. In autumn 2007 the US toned down its insistence on pursuing a controversial Colombia-style fumigation programme and shelved the idea for the near future.¹⁶ Opponents argue that aerial spraying of farmers' crops would hand the Taliban a powerful propaganda tool. Villagers still have bitter memories of a Soviet campaign that destroyed food crops through aerial defoliation and devastated local economies. Finally, the chemical spraying policy puts the US at odds with the Karzai government as well as with its European allies, both of which were strongly opposed to the use of herbicides. This was highly inconvenient at a time when one of the chief problems in Afghanistan was the lack of a unified, coordinated strategy for confronting the deteriorating political and security situation both among the international actors and between them and the Afghan government.

Then, on December 11, US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates bluntly told Congress that the United States had no effective plan for dismantling Afghanistan's opium industry. He offered an unambiguous critique of the US effort so far and warned that unless changes were made, the Taliban would be the beneficiaries. Significantly, Gates added that the United States had become isolated among its allies thanks to its support for aerial fumigation of Afghan poppy fields. He implied that the US was following a policy which would leave Washington open to the charge that it is targeting the poor farmer while ignoring the high-end trafficker who takes the lion's share of the profits and colludes with the Taliban: "The day we go in and eradicate somebody's crops, we better be there with alternative seeds, some money, and a way to get that product to market, or we will have just recruited somebody else for the Taliban," Gates said.¹⁷ For the time being, according to Thomas Schweich, the US coordinator for counter-narcotics efforts in Afghanistan, the US will continue with ground-level eradication, while also trying harder to control the pervasive corruption in the programme that has exempted the powerful and punished the weak and poor.¹⁸

The shift on crop spraying together with Gates' new realism may be interpreted as a hopeful sign that Washington is finally recognising the complexity of the issue and the risk of subjecting it to simple, draconian solutions. But these developments are slender reeds upon which to base optimism about the US and NATO coordinating an effective strategy for Afghanistan. Apart from divergences over counter-narcotics, members disagree over the right mix of military and reconstruction assistance, the weight to give to military versus development strategies and the tactics for their implementation. At the bottom of all this lies a cleavage in how the mission is conceived. The Bush administration has always seen Afghanistan as a theater in the global war on terror. The Europeans tend to see Afghanistan as linked to the fight against terrorism, but also more broadly as a failed state in need of outside help for peacekeeping and nation-building. And they see the US as being wedded to military solutions - waging war in Afghanistan while the Europeans come looking to address difficult issues. The perception is one of warriors versus problem solvers.

However, there are also divisions within the western military regarding overall strategies to deal with the insurgency (for example, campaigns to kill Taliban versus efforts to protect and win over local communities) and tactics such as aerial bombing, which may have militarily benefits in the short-run but are detrimental to the long-term goal of entrenching and expanding the authority of the central government. The US has been frustrated by the levels of contribution from the various member states and has been pressuring them to up the ante. Given that the US has short-changed the Afghanistan mission - especially after becoming obsessed with Iraq - and that the situation is deteriorating and the populations of NATO countries are becoming increasingly disillusioned with the mission, Washington now finds itself in a weak position where

¹⁶ John, Mark., "No Afghan opium spraying from air for now -US", Reuters Alternet (Interview), 28 November 2007.

¹⁷ Morgan, David., "Gates slams US counternarcotics in Afghanistan", Reuters, 12 December 2007.

¹⁸ John, Mark., "No Afghan opium spraying..."

it is difficult to twist any arms. Still, the most bitter debates concern the argument over which countries are doing the fighting and which have committed only to defensive non-combat roles. Countries on the front line of the Afghan battlefield tend to feel, as Robert Fowler, Canada's former Deputy Minister of the Department of National Defense said recently: "[It is] simply that there are four countries fighting and the rest are watching."¹⁹

Finally, there are important debates among NATO members, and within the allied governments themselves, regarding the murky question of negotiating with the insurgency. NATO is divided on the issue. Officially, those nations with military missions in Afghanistan find the idea of unconditional negotiations with the enemy, aimed at some kind of power-sharing agreement, unpalatable. However, many international and Afghan government actors are increasingly sympathetic to talking to the Taliban in order to entice leaders to lay down their arms, abandon the insurgency and side with the government.

The Bush administration has generally taken a hard line on talks, stating that the US does not negotiate with terrorists. Legitimising the Taliban by talking to them was considered an admission of weakness. Even if the goal was reconciliation with the government, it was akin to bribing murderers to be good. Washington is still officially opposed to any formal negotiations with the Afghan insurgents. However, between formal peace negotiations and the briefest and most surreptitious of contacts, lies an array of negotiating possibilities.

Once again reflecting its lack of a clear-headed strategy on Afghanistan, Washington is divided on the matter. The State Department, over the objections of the US military, has occasionally opened the door to the possibility of some form of talks designed to wean the Taliban from the insurgency. And the administration may be softening its position. To the extent that the US is slowly admitting the political nature of the conflict, the prospect of a political solution is no longer off the table. This implies some tolerance for negotiations - at least those held unofficially and privately. Recent comments by Ambassador William Wood may confirm this. Wood declared: "The United States is in favour of a serious reconciliation programme with those elements of the Taliban who are prepared to accept the constitution and the authority of the elected government of President Karzai, who wish to reconcile, to return to a peaceful and legitimate life."²⁰ The statement is close to echoing the position of Karzai. As the BBC notes "the [NATO] mantra now is - fighting alone will not bring peace and stability".²¹

And whether publicly or in secret, talks with select leaders of the insurgency are going on. For some time President Karzai has publicly invited moderate Taliban to discuss quid pro quos such as switching allegiance to the government in return for political posts. The most recent example is that of Mullah Abdel Salaam, a former Taliban commander who switched sides just before the joint NATO-Afghan operation to retake Musa Qala in Helmand province in December 2007. Credited by some with facilitating NATO's initial success, Salaam was rewarded recently with the local governorship of Musa Qala. The government said that the move was consistent with the policy of President Karzai who has stated that "all those former Taliban who come and accept the constitution and who want to participate in the political process through non-violent means ... they are welcome".²²

Musa Qala was significant for another reason. The military and political success of retaking the area and wooing Mullah Salaam to the government side enabled the government to capture and destroy some 60 heroin laboratories and perhaps \$25 million in drugs (US Ambassador Wood suggested a \$500 million street value) the proceeds of which were mostly destined for the Taliban's coffers. But this military seizure was far more efficient and productive than the heavy-

¹⁹ Davis, Jeff, "NATO's Handling of Afghan Mission Under Fire," *The Hill Times*, Canada, 12 December 2007.

²⁰ Leithead, Alastair, BBC News, Kabul, 5 January 2008.

²¹ Leithead, Alastair, "Great Game' or just misunderstanding?", BBC News, Kabul, 5 January 2008.

²² "Former Taliban commander made Afghan governor", *The Daily Times*, Pakistan, 9 January 2008.

handed and corruption-laden process of crop eradication. As Barnett Rubin has pointed out, the Musa Qala operation “show[s] that forced eradication is not necessary for tackling the link between insurgency and narcotics. There was no eradication in Musa Qala....This is interdiction, not eradication. If the government had forcibly eradicated the crop, would Mullah Abdul Salaam have come over to the government side? Would the operation have succeeded?”²³

If Afghanistan is to be salvaged, much needs to be done to repair the damaged credibility of both the international community in Afghanistan and the Karzai government, whose appeal and support has been slipping badly in each of the past three years. First, the US needs to review its priorities and engage in an honest assessment of its shortcomings so far. Second, it needs to question seriously the skewed reliance on military solutions to the insurgency and its emphasis on eradication as the primary approach to opium growing. Third, Washington needs to define security into terms of local needs - especially the development of underfunded and fragile Afghan police forces - not just as killing more of the enemy than can be replaced, a strategy which has clearly failed. Likewise, the US and NATO need to undertake a cost-benefit analysis of the tactic of aerial bombing in recognition of the damage it does to civilians and, in turn, efforts to gain their allegiance. Fourth, development aid and strategies need to be reviewed for their effectiveness and better integrated with counterinsurgency measures.

Finally, and above all, all US strategies need to be coordinated in an overarching plan that is synchronised with NATO allies. Counter-narcotics strategy should be part of a sophisticated, diversified counterinsurgency programme and counter-narcotics/insurgency in turn should be subsumed into a broad-based and well-coordinated reconstruction and nation-building project. The problems both between the US and NATO and among the NATO members themselves are manifold. At this point there are no guarantees and the best that can be said is that Afghanistan will be a long and hard road—perhaps taking decades.

It may yet be possible to demobilise the armed men who have risen from the dragon’s teeth planted by Western error in the rocky soil of Afghanistan. It may yet be possible to craft a plan for a sustainable peace. But this can only come to be if wisdom is finally hitched to power.

The challenges to achieving these goals for NATO, and its discourse with the US, European governments and the populations supporting the Afghanistan mission, will be the subject of a second essay. A final essay will take up the role of Pakistan both in Afghanistan and as a central front in the global war on terror.

²³Rubin, Barnett, “Erroneous Talking Points...”

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