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**STATE-BUILDING IN AFGHANISTAN:  
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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**The Future Role of the United States  
in Afghanistan**

**Thomas E. Gouttierre**

**Dean, International Studies and Programs  
and  
Director, Center for Afghanistan Studies**

UNIVERSITY OF  
**Nebraska**  
Omaha

In any discussion on Afghanistan, the future role of the United States looms as the proverbial two-ton gorilla in the room. Its current role is the largest: often praised, it is also the most criticized; it is regarded as the most crucial and as the most controversial; it is seen by most Afghans as their last best hope, yet they are not persuaded that US commitment and focus concerning their country will not wane.

Over the years, Afghan policymakers and citizens have regularly lamented that the relations between the peoples and governments of Afghanistan and the USA have been characteristically inconsistent. In his book, published posthumously in 1995, The Kingdom of Afghanistan and the United States: 1828-1973, Leon Poullada, an accomplished scholar and former ambassador who served in Afghanistan as a diplomat, saw the roots of the American inconsistency in what he calls America's ***Afghan Blind Spot***. He asserts that:

“conscientious American diplomats have tried to awaken the policy makers in Washington to a sense of urgency about Afghan problems, and to impress upon them the geostrategic importance of Afghanistan to South Asia and the Middle East. Somehow, the *Afghan Blind Spot* was always there, not explicitly perhaps, but always present as a hidden barrier to effective and timely actions. When American political and military strategists were seriously considering the problems of area defense or Soviet

containment, Afghanistan was always mysteriously overlooked or deliberately ignored.”

Afghans have been acutely aware of this “*blind spot*”; they could never understand what they viewed as American short-sightedness in its policies regarding their country. Even after the memorable collaboration between Afghans and Americans which produced the Soviet defeat in 1989, Afghans were incredulous that the US seemed to retreat from the region almost as rapidly as the Soviets.

In late 2001, in an interview with US News and World Report, I was asked about the future role of the US in Afghanistan. I responded that, “the rest of the Muslim world is going to be grading us by how we perform in Afghanistan.” (See Attachment 1). I was motivated to make such an observation by my own incurable optimism. This optimism was fueled by the belief that this chapter in the US history with Afghanistan offered our country an opportunity to go into a region of the world where US interests were in serious jeopardy and to acquit itself in a manner that could engender praise and gain friends.

If it did well in Afghanistan, the US might counter the negative impression that Middle Easterners, in particular, seemed to harbor, and that fed the terrorism that struck on 9/11. This opportunity came with many challenges, not the least of which concerned security, reconstruction, the opium trade, the cost of programs, US politics, etc.

Perhaps the most daunting challenges related to how the US government would handle the perceptions and expectations Afghans held regarding the USA. In general, the vast majority of Afghans have positive feelings about the US. Yet, they continued to worry about the US capacity to sustain its focus regarding their country. And, after nearly three decades of war and deprivation, the expectations of Afghans were emotionally driven and enormous.

During his state visit to the USA in late May of 2005, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai made an earnest plea to those Americans whom he addressed at each stop. To the citizens of Boston, Washington, DC, and Omaha and West Point, Nebraska, Karzai urged Americans "not to forget Afghanistan." Why would the leader of a nation that was receiving millions of dollars in US reconstruction assistance, that had nearly 20,000

American troops based within its borders, and that was actively engaged as an ally of the US in the “War on Terrorism” feel the necessity to make such a plea?

Karzai’s request to Americans that they not forget Afghanistan echoed the concerns oft expressed by official and private Afghan citizens alike. Many Afghans are quick to cite what they already see as a shift in the US focus on the “War on Terrorism” from Afghanistan to Iraq, from the territory where the terrorists were trained and where they are still active, to a country whose role in the war to them seems less strategic than that of their own.

Afghans are also aware of the discrepancy in the funding levels the US government requests for its efforts in Iraq and for those in Afghanistan. They know too that the US troop strength in Iraq is more than eight times that in Afghanistan. Now, as the post-Bonn period approaches, Afghans hear rumors that the US is contemplating reducing its troops in Afghanistan by 4000.

## Positive Developments

Criticisms of US government reconstruction and development efforts in Afghanistan are plentiful; some come from internal US government audits, others from journalists and multinational partners. Afghans, too, are most vocal about expectations not realized.

Yet, there can be no denying the many **positive developments** accomplished by the efforts of the Afghans and their international partners. The role of the US has been primary or at least very instrumental in many of these.

The **population and commercial centers** of Afghanistan are being resuscitated. The bazaars of Kabul, Qandahar, Herat, Bamiyan, and Mazari Shareef are well-stocked with food, essential goods, and an amazing array of commodities. The people are in the streets in colorful clothing. They bargain for their purchases, shouting above the cacophony and gridlock created by the four-wheel vehicles of donor nations and organizations, the other means of transport drawn by humans and animals, and the ubiquitous music blaring from loudspeakers in the bazaars.

Most noticeable is the look of hope and anticipation in the eyes of a nation where none existed five years ago. There is a building and rebuilding boom in the population centers – a demonstration of confidence that perhaps the long national nightmare of Afghanistan is coming to an end.

**Education** is being pursued by Afghans with a vengeance. This follows years of little or no access. More Afghan schoolchildren, over 4 million, are in school than at any other time in Afghan history. Education is the only national effort that reaches into all the provinces and districts of Afghanistan. This sector has received support from more donor sources than any other. A lack of coordination between these sources and the Ministry of Education has been a concomitant negative result.

The reconstruction of Afghanistan's **ground transport** infrastructure is improving access of Afghans to their government and regional commercial centers. Afghanistan's "Ring Road" is being rebuilt. The Kabul-Qandahar corridor is reopened, reducing travel time from nearly two days to 5 hours. The Salang Tunnel through the Hindu Kush Mountains is repaired and reopened, again reducing travel time from Kabul to the north

from several days to 5 or 6 hours. Donors have been identified for each of the remaining sectors.

Road reconstruction also plays a role in the improvement of Afghanistan's **economy** and its ability to play an integral role in the **trade** between South and Central Asian nations. When asked why Afghanistan is important to regional and US interests, I like to recite the real estate mantra: "location, location, location!"

Astride arteries of the old Silk and Spice Roads, Afghanistan is already profiting as a transit sector for commercial traffic between its neighbors in West, South, and Central Asia. Should a natural gas pipeline be built from Turkmenistan to Pakistan, it will likely travel a route above the Herat-Qandahar sector of the Ring Road. In essence, Afghanistan has begun the process of rejoining the world economy, other than with that tied to the opium poppy.

The traditional exports of Afghanistan (fruits, nuts, textiles and carpets, jewelry and precious stones) are once again being shipped abroad. In 2003, America bought over 14,000 square meters of hand

woven carpets, 13 tons of dried and fresh fruit, and almost 600 tons of licorice root(!).

Unlike Iraqis and many others in the Muslim world, Afghans had a previous history with **constitutional, democratic process**. During the decade under the Constitution of 1964, Afghans elected national officials and governments and turned them out with votes of no confidence. Afghans retained this “democratic experiment,” as it was often called, in their collective memory. Many believed that a democratic process was their legacy and their right. This facilitated the process that has produced a new constitution and successful elections for President in 2004 and Parliament in 2005.

The size of the **US mission** in Afghanistan is unprecedented; its complex in Kabul is imposing; it suggests neither a short-term nor inconsequential presence. The number and profile of the US troops, though lower than many Afghans might prefer, is substantial enough to imply that, this time, Afghanistan is regarded as crucial to American interests by the US government. An agreement signed earlier this month by President Karzai and Ambassador Neumann commits the US

government to **\$5.5 billion for development over the next five years.**

According to Finance Minister Anwar-ulHaq Ahadi, this makes the United States Afghanistan's "biggest supporter."

Another positive development centers around the growing number and effectiveness of the **Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs).**

Lieutenant General David Barno's vision for the PRT process has proven to be solid. Members of the Center for Afghanistan Studies have observed particularly successful PRT efforts led by New Zealand forces in Bamiyan and British forces in Mazari Shareef.

### **Challenges**

These positive developments have been obtained despite what most analysts characterized as a slow, distracted, and sometimes inept start on the part of US and coalition forces. The **donor conference approach** has proven to be disjointed, inconsistent, and largely unmanageable. Funds that have been pledged are late in coming; some do not come at all. US leadership in the process has often been solicitous rather than forthright.

The continuing security, political, and economic challenges to the reconstruction of Afghanistan remain formidable. The most critical is **security**. The lack of it negatively affects all other factors. While there has been perceptible development of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP), it is not substantial enough to provide essential security outside population centers.

The three primary security threats (terrorists, drug lords, and war lords) are holdovers from the period of protracted civil war in Afghanistan. Though routed out of their strongholds and camps after 9/11, replenished and reorganized elements of Al Qaidah and the Taliban remain at large and constitute a threat, both real and symbolic, to the overall reconstruction effort. They gain financial support from drug interests.

These elements threaten Afghan teachers, students, election workers and other government workers, even shopowners and farmers. They threaten them with death or other bodily harm if they teach, go to school, register to vote or assist the election process, or appear to side with the government. International assistance workers and military forces are also threatened. In 2005, nearly 1500 people have been killed in Afghanistan,

including almost 90 members of the US military. The continuing capacity of these terrorists to intimidate slows and even terminates reconstruction efforts.

Though an unprecedented number of Afghan school children are now in school, a number of challenges confront the **education** sector.

- 1) More teachers are needed. This should be among the highest priorities of the Afghan government and donors.
- 2) More in-service teacher training is necessary to bring some standard to education throughout the country. Many current teachers do not possess any manner of formal training.
- 3) The delivery of textbooks and teachers kits is flawed. Though millions of textbooks have been produced, many classrooms remain without books.
- 4) Vocational education is essential for the unemployed and underemployed. The Afghan government has set a target to train those Afghan men weaned from militia forces. What will they do for employment? They are not likely to go to regular primary or secondary schools. Vocational education in the basic construction

and office management skills would attract large numbers. The need is severe, particularly for construction projects. Currently, there are thousands of foreign workers in Afghanistan due to the lack of trained Afghans. For many, vocational literacy would also be essential.

- 5) The pace of the physical reconstruction of schools is slow; many schools are still without water and sanitation.
- 6) Security threats continue to impede the attendance of girls in schools in certain rural areas.
- 7) Higher Education, an area in which the US was the leading donor prior to the Soviet invasion, remains relatively neglected, though some new initiatives are in the process. Few laboratory resources remain at Kabul University. This sector within education is the stepchild, with priority accorded primary and secondary education by the Afghan government and donor nations.

Most Afghans do not have access to reliable **health care**. This is particularly critical for mothers and children. Afghan infant and maternal mortality rates are the highest and second highest in the world, respectively.

Most of Afghanistan's trained medical personnel left during the war years. The only credible colleges of medicine were located at Kabul University and in Jalalabad. The former is now a separate institution of higher learning – Kabul Medical University. Its facilities are woeful; the nearby teaching hospital was destroyed during the wars.

**Rural reconstruction** lags far behind that of the reconstruction moving forward in population centers. This deficiency sustains the power of local and regional war lords and handicaps the reach and influence of the central government. The crowding of Afghans into population centers, coupled with the inflationary presence of international organizations, leaves many Afghans without any real option; they cannot stay in the neglected rural areas and cannot afford to relocate in the centers where services are available. The men in particular are vulnerable to those who would employ them away from the process of reconstruction into the militias of war lords and the cultivation of poppies. There is little or no training focused to provide alternative economies or livelihoods to opium.

Reconstruction and development efforts are seriously impeded by the **many forms of gridlock** that have particularly infected Kabul. The most visible form of gridlock involves the surfeit of SUVs and other vehicles, mostly utilized by foreign NGOs and government agencies. It brings traffic to a standstill, impeding commerce, delaying meetings, and causing tremendous frustration among Kabulis.

There is also population gridlock. In a city that may have the capacity to provide services effectively to one million people, population estimates now place the number of inhabitants at as high as 4 million. As a result, wells are overused; sanitation, which was never good, has become a potential disaster. The hydroelectric power supply is erratic, stalling private and public development.

The gridlock of multiple programs run by international NGOs and multilateral and governmental agencies in similar development areas inhibits Afghan ministry efforts to incorporate the efforts in Afghan national planning.

Criticism of programs managed by **for-profit US organizations** are raised in-depth in the 7 November 2005 issue of the *New York Times* and the 20 November 2005 issue of the *Washington Post*. These articles are especially critical of USAID's project to construct schools and clinics. Sources for the criticism include the State and Defense Departments and internal auditors. Afghans who might benefit from the successful completion of these projects are informed about these problems and have joined the criticism.

### **Recommendations**

In its future role in Afghanistan, the US should improve its performances in the established priority areas. The experience gained over the past four years should prove to be beneficial. Brief recommendations relating to the priority areas of *Leadership and Coordination, Security, Health Care, and Education* follow.

**Leadership and Coordination.** A majority of Afghans see the overall international effort as American-led, or simply as American, regardless of the nature of the participants or organizations. For many, if an effort fails, it will be deemed an American failure regardless of proprietorship.

The multinational nature of the coalition involved in Afghanistan's reconstruction is desirable and requires a cooperative approach. But, it would be of benefit to all involved, donors and recipients alike, if coordination and leadership of the international efforts in Afghanistan were improved. Afghan perceptions and expectations concerning the US role in Afghanistan will be formed accordingly. Greater involvement of Afghan institutions and personnel in the planning and delivery processes is still needed after more than four years.

### **Security.**

- 1) An increase in the joint international and Afghan military capacity to provide security in rural areas is critical to the expansion of development programming beyond population centers and to the need to extend the influence of the Afghan national government. Until the ANA and ANP are up to this task, additional external support should be provided.
- 2) Greater cooperation from Pakistan is essential to capture one or more of the four aces in the Afghan deck of cards: Usama bin Ladin, Aiman Zawahiri, Mullah Muhammad Umar, and Gulbudeen Hikmatyar. They remain the real and

symbolic leaders of the terrorist networks whose activities are the cause of the periodic alerts in the US and Europe, not those adversaries focused on disrupting the process in Iraq. The fact that they all remain at-large undermines the confidence in US policy among Afghans.

- 3) The US government should intensify pressure on Afghanistan's neighbors and Persian Gulf nations not to aid and support forces connected to the security threats to Afghanistan.

**Health Care.** Support for training of medical personnel at Kabul Medical University (KMU) and other viable medical institutions should be provided. Until Afghanistan replaces those doctors who left over the past 30 years, health care in Afghanistan will remain woeful. Reconstruction of the former teaching hospital located next to KMU should be undertaken. The timely completion of the health clinics behind in schedule should receive greater attention.

**Education.** Increased emphasis should be placed on teacher training, delivery of textbooks and teachers kits, and timely construction of

schools. Vocational education in basic construction, engine repair, and office management skills should be launched within the PRT framework in support of anti-drug initiatives. The US initiative for supporting the higher education sector in 2006 should be enhanced in subsequent years.

**International Exchange Programs.** The number of short-term exchange programs that bring Afghans and Americans together should be increased to enhance efforts in the above priority areas. Some of these can be done in cooperation with local US groups that often are willing to share programming and hosting costs. After nearly 30 years of being isolated from the West, such programs, if planned and executed with realistic and applicable goals and activities, can be very beneficial to individuals seeking inspiration, sustained connections, and specific training.

The University of Nebraska at Omaha's Center for Afghanistan Studies (UNO/CAS) has proposed, created, and managed numbers of such programs over the past four years. More than 100 women have participated to date. Some of the programs have focused on the training of female educators. Others have linked the communities of Charikar and Bamiyan in Afghanistan with the sister cities of Shenandoah, Iowa and

Scottsbluff/Gering, Nebraska, respectively. Another is providing entrepreneurial training for Afghan women. Still another links Kabul Medical University with the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

These exchanges are designed to be sustained, to promote ongoing communication between participants from both countries. No participant has stayed in a hotel during her stay; all have lived with host families.

One of the American sister-cities, Scottsbluff/Gering, is paying for two-year training programs in Nebraska for two Afghan nurses from Bamiyan. Seven members of its sister-city association have travelled to Bamiyan in a tour arranged and facilitated by the UNO/CAS. Scottsbluff/Gering has twice hosted the visit of the Governor of Bamiyan (the current governor and the governor immediately preceding her). The current governor, Habiba Sarabi, is the first female governor in Afghanistan's history.

Sustained linkages are more likely to develop from such community-based programs than from those conducted by for-profit organizations and by governments. However, support from government programs can be

critical to providing the seed money or supplementary funding to initiate such connections or relationships. (See Attachment 2 for articles describing these exchanges.)

The US government should consider increasing its support for such programs. Partial federal support often stimulates community support and participation. The result is generally the improvement of international understanding at a very modest cost.

Consider how beneficial a month-long visit by newly elected Afghan members of parliament that includes staying with the families of American state legislators and observing throughout the stay the state's legislative process! Or, how about similar experiences for emerging Afghan entrepreneurs?

### **The Window of Opportunity Remains Open**

In spite of a slow and inconsistent start, the window of opportunity for the interests of both Afghans and Americans could be advanced by a successful reconstruction of Afghanistan. Some of these interests are shared: the substantial reduction of opium production; the elimination of

terrorist groups operating in Afghanistan and along the Afghan-Pakistani border; the development of a gas pipeline from Turkmenistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan (and eventually to India?).

Afghanistan brings several assets to this process. A **credible political process** has been launched without the uncertainties that plague Iraq. The Afghan government is gaining capacity. It is true that its reach is often limited to Kabul and, tenuously, to other population centers. At the same time, it must be noted that almost all members of the government had little or no experience in the governance process before their current assignments. They literally had to learn on the job. There are legitimate complaints stimulated by evidence and rumors of corruption and incompetence. Yet, some in this new cadre of Afghan civil servants are learning well and have helped to restore a measure of credibility in the restoration of an Afghan state.

The leadership of this government has been identified and confirmed by national elections. President Hamid Karzai, though not without detractors, and even implacable enemies, among Afghans, is largely well-known and well-regarded. He understands and is a believer in

human rights. He pursues consensus, perhaps to a fault; he learned this skill from his late father, a highly regarded tribal khan who was an influential member of parliament during the constitutional monarchy of Muhammad Zahir Shah. His reelection in 2004 enhanced stability and provided continuity to a delicate process.

Karzai has attracted a sizeable group of **Afghan technocrats** from home and abroad to work with him. These individuals share his visions concerning restoration of Afghanistan's nationhood, modernization, human rights, and constitutionalism. They are replacing many of the Afghan civil servants lost in the braindrains caused by recent Afghan events. (See Attachment 3, *Kabuli Afghans*, which describes earlier Afghan civil servants). It is not likely that another such aggregation of talent and enlightened leadership could be readily combined, should this one fail. It remains in the interests of the US to do everything it can to provide every opportunity for success for this group of Afghans.

Afghans are very clear about the way they feel about Americans; they want them in Afghanistan. They are more likely to become distressed by a reduction of US forces or US presence than by an increase.

Afghans want dynamic American leadership and assistance in the reconstruction process. Except from the remnants of the Taliban and Al Qaidah, there are no armed insurrections in the towns and villages.

Afghans have never regarded Americans as their enemies. To the contrary, they appreciated our development assistance in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s. They appreciated American support in their war against the Soviet Union and, though belated, in the war against terrorists. They now see us as their primary allies in the reconstruction of their country.

### **Conclusion**

The whole world, especially the Muslim world, is still watching the US in Afghanistan. US success in Afghanistan is still more likely and less costly in lives and money than in Iraq. If it does **not** try to “do” Afghanistan on the cheap and in piecemeal fashion, the US can work successfully with the Afghans in this cooperative venture. It will acquit itself admirably in its own eyes, in the eyes of Afghans, and in the eyes of others around the world.

If the US muddles through, it will probably still prevent Afghanistan from returning to its status as a haven for terrorist camps. It will cost the US more, take a longer period, and not really gain the credit it would deserve by doing it right. An already unstable Pakistan might also be lost in the process.

Much effort has been expended. Americans and Afghans have learned much in the process. Assets are available and in place. This **can** be done right. The window is still open; the choice is ours.

NOTE: I have attached copy of my favorite Dari poem "Rose and Clay" (See Attachment 4). Afghans often recite it to describe how they feel about friends. It paints a superb picture of the value of a successful relationship.