

The Case for U.S. Leadership in Rebuilding Afghanistan

WALI M. OSMAN

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S U M M A R Y To further its strategic interests and national security, the United States has intervened in Afghanistan twice in less than two decades, first in the fight against the Soviets and then the Taliban. Now, as Afghans attempt to rebuild, American interests are at stake again. Before the Soviet takeover, Afghanistan had been moving slowly toward modernity, its development impeded by ethnic and tribal divisions kept in check by the monarchy's patronage system. Today, the country needs not only a new physical infrastructure but also institutions that will enable it to function as a modern economy, while politically accommodating its diverse and divided population. Democratization and economic development offer the best hope for stability, and specific steps can be taken to achieve these outcomes, but the country cannot move forward without increased security. Warlords contest the authority of the transitional government, which is itself critically divided. Beyond the issue of security, there is the urgent need for a more active commitment of U.S. resources and influence to the political and economic aspects of the reconstruction effort.

The rebuilding of Afghanistan is in question today, as Americans debate what degree of involvement best serves U.S. needs for stability in Central Asia, and Afghans attempt to reestablish themselves after more than two decades of war. Afghanistan's reconstruction challenge is daunting. Nevertheless, with assurances of a long-term U.S. commitment, Afghans can begin to put in place an infrastructure and institutions adapted to current realities.

The U.S.-Afghan Relationship Before September 2001

After World War II, the Afghan king Mohammad Zahir and his prime minister, Mohammad Daoud, hoped to link their country's future to the West. They made their overtures to the United States but the approach was rejected. Unlike its neighbor Iran, Afghanistan had no major oil reserves and the country held neither economic nor strategic interest for the United States. For the Afghans, this rejection had immediate political and economic implications. Afghanistan was a subsistence economy whose export income would not pay for the infrastructure needed for development. With its population growing and with an educated middle-class emerging in Kabul and other cities, the regime faced new demands that it had hoped to meet with American aid. Afghans had always fiercely protected their independence against encroachment by their neighbors. Now, Zahir and Daoud saw no alternative but to accept a growing involvement with the Soviet Union next door.

The result was the gradual expansion of Soviet influence into Afghan military, political, and economic spheres. Scores of Afghans began to study in Soviet-bloc countries. At the core of Sovietization was the creation of military and civilian cadres who, when they ascended to power, would have the means to hold the country as Soviet proxies. Conversion of the elite and indoctrination of the masses, the Russians believed, was the optimal route, miscalculating by a historically momentous margin the unflinching hatred they evoked in the average Afghan.

In the late 1950s, the United States reconsidered the importance of Afghanistan to Cold War arrangements

but only after the Shah of Iran alerted Americans to Soviet designs. Americans began to send aid and to bring Afghans to the United States for study. When the first group of Afghans returned home with advanced degrees and some dollars, they brought a new worldview to a country already beginning to change.

While the Russians concentrated on the military, politics, and the extraction of Afghan natural gas at below world prices, U.S. aid to Afghanistan was focused on infrastructure, education, and agriculture. Americans funded and staffed Kabul University's colleges of agriculture and engineering, where the medium of instruction was English and whose graduates were the country's newest elite. Outside of education, the most notable example of U.S. aid was diversion of the Helmand River in the southwest of the country. This was Afghanistan's first integrated development project, creating canals, new farmlands, towns, and a brand new city, Lashkargah, to which Afghans gave the sobriquet "Little New York."

The Helmand project created good will, and the Afghan government hoped for a U.S. commitment that would continue to boost Afghan living standards, but the United States began to scale back in the late 1960s while the Soviets continued implementing their long-range plans. Data are lacking, but it would appear that the Afghan economy grew rapidly only in the late 1950s and 1960s at the time of competing U.S. and Russian aid programs. The pressure to accept more Soviet aid increased when the United States disengaged and the economy subsequently slowed down.

In the early 1970s, with only a nominal U.S. presence in the country, the Russians moved to fill the void and tensions began to rise. Daoud, who had been forced out of the government in 1963, returned to power as president in 1973, bringing to an end the centuries-old monarchy. The main supporters of his bloodless "revolution" were Russian-trained officers. Nevertheless, once back in power, Daoud attempted to loosen the Soviet hold on the country, and the Russians duly responded. In early 1978, acting through their surrogates, the Soviets accomplished a violent takeover and installed Afghanistan's first communist regime. A series of puppet regimes failed

U.S. rejection of Afghan overtures after WWII had immediate political and economic implications

to contain Afghan resistance; the Soviet Union invaded at the end of 1979.

By the mid-1980s, the United States had reengaged in Afghanistan, arming the rebels, the Mujahideen, who proved uncannily effective using U.S.-made Stinger missiles against Soviet air power. However, U.S. support had no political and strategic content beyond the war. Once the Russians left, in February 1989, the United States disengaged, disappointing the expectations of many Afghans for some continued U.S. involvement.

Meanwhile, both the urban and subsistence economies had collapsed since most Afghans were now warriors or refugees. The system that held Afghanistan together under the monarchy was no longer in place. In the absence of any common vision for a post-Soviet Afghanistan, the resistance groups, unable to share power, had turned their guns on each other, and the power vacuum of civil war gave outsiders their opportunity. The primitive and repressive Taliban, funded by Arab oil money and manufactured in Pakistan, emerged out of the chaos and took control of most of the country. Next came the Al Qaeda terrorist network, the events of September 11, 2001, and the return of Americans to Afghanistan. In the following months, the U.S. military ejected the Taliban with the assistance, in particular, of the Afghan Northern Alliance.

Today, Americans understand all too well that Afghanistan must be brought back to the community of nations, “not only as a humanitarian goal but in [their] own vital national interest, as an integral part of the war on terror.”ⁱ The Afghans appear to be somewhat amenable to the military presence of outsiders. As U.S. policy evolves and conditions on the ground change, the key question is how to make the country secure, stable, and eventually reasonably prosperous.

The Afghan Nation

As it is configured geographically, ethnically, and linguistically, Afghanistan is a collection of mutually indifferent or antagonistic peoples forced to share a piece of land. Except for the land and a common determination to turn back intruders, the various

groups have little that would hold them together as a nation. The first countrywide demographic study, a sample survey, was funded and carried out with U.S. aid in 1970–75.ⁱⁱ Even this survey would not capture the nomads, about 10–15 percent of the population.

Preliminary findings were that about 45 percent of Afghans were Pushtun, 25 percent Tajik, 10 percent Hazara, and 5 percent Uzbek, with other groups making up the rest. Within each main ethnic group were many tribes, especially among Pushtuns, whose tribes number into the hundreds. Total population was an estimated 15 million; today population estimates range from 20 to 28 million. In terms of governance, Afghanistan was composed of fiefdoms all owing loyalty to the Pushtun royal clan in exchange for money and protection. The Pushtuns themselves were mostly disunited unless faced with an assault on their lands and freedom.

The country had two official languages: Pushtu and Farsi (Persian). In addition, there were more than a dozen other languages, some spoken by small groups in remote areas. The work of Afghan government, business, and education was conducted in Farsi throughout the country. As a result, every Pushtun had to learn Farsi to go to school or to work for government or in any business requiring written communication. Non-Pushtuns had no reason to learn Pushtu because its practical use was limited to Pushtun areas.

The Pushtuns had in common their language, which has many dialects, and Sunni Islam. They were connected ethnically to the large Pushtun population of Pakistan. The non-Pushtuns were divided by language and religion. The Tajik were mostly Sunni Muslims and spoke Farsi. This gave them access to Western ideas mainly through the Iranian media. The Hazara were Shiite Muslims more closely identifying with Iran. Relations between Tajik and Hazara were seldom friendly, but they were united against the Pushtun domination. The Uzbeks were either Sunni or Shiite Muslims and aligned themselves with the other non-Pushtun groups to rise against Pushtuns or external threats.

The country’s ruling group spoke Pushtu; the bureaucracies were in the hands of Farsi speakers. This

Today Americans understand all too well that Afghanistan must be brought back to the community of nations

linguistic divide alone was enough to forestall the development of national institutions and, in fact, the Pushtuns tried and failed to extend the use of Pushtu into the north at the beginning of the 20th century. The glue that held the country together, the monarchy, controlled the disparate groups by distributing whatever tax and aid money there was in the national treasury and by allowing autonomy over local affairs.

Ethnic rivalries over power and resources have always been the political determinant in Afghanistan. The country's complex ethnic reality is even more problematic now as a result of the civil war and its aftermath and because of the power of the warlords, whose domains sometimes cut across ethnic lines. Recent events have added yet another element to the mix.

Just before the United States liberated the country from the predominantly Pushtun Taliban, the non-Pushtun Northern Alliance controlled about 10 percent of the country. Today, with a government in Kabul headed by a leader whose legitimacy many question, ethnic tensions are back in force. The most significant evidence of this is that U.S. forces, not Afghan guards, provide security to the transitional president, Hamid Karzai, who narrowly escaped an assassination attempt on September 5, 2002.

What makes the situation unique is that U.S. military action put the Northern Alliance in a position of power the group did not expect. To the degree that the Alliance can use any association of any Pushtun group with the Taliban and Al Qaeda to undermine Pushtun credibility and power, it will. Pushtun and non-Pushtun alike suffered under the Taliban, but with the Pushtuns under attack for allowing Al Qaeda and the Taliban to control the country, the Alliance sees an opportunity to claim that only it is entitled to power.

Since the first identification of Afghanistan as a discrete entity 250 years ago, the country has been ruled by the Pushtuns, with only brief interruptions ended by war. The transitional government is headed by a Pushtun, Karzai, but controlled by non-Pushtuns who will not willingly relinquish their position of strength because they believe once they are out, they may be out forever. A Northern Alliance attempt to rule Afghanistan is at best a gamble. At worst, it is

precursor to the next civil war. If Afghanistan is to become a legitimate country and not a collection of warring ethnic groups and warlord fiefdoms, institutions must be established that will apportion power fairly across the board and allow market mechanisms to function.

The Legacy of the Monarchy

The monarchy produced three constitutions, in 1923, 1931, and 1964. Each made its own attempt to rationalize the relationship among Islamic legal codes, customary and tribal law, and the judicial authority of the royal government. In 1964 with the U.S. example in mind, King Zahir grafted a nine-member supreme court and an attorney general's office onto the system.ⁱⁱⁱ

Early in the twentieth century, the country was divided into six provinces. Zahir created more, some to dilute the power of the local leaders, some to offer power to men who would, in turn, support the monarchy. Today, there are 30 provinces that function as administrative entities.

In the 1960s, the country was moving ahead at its own pace. Coed classes were held uneventfully at Kabul University. A second campus was launched in Jalalabad with other campuses planned for other cities. Two women held ministerial positions in the government. With the number of educated women growing in the cities, the government could no longer ignore the pressure to abolish dowry. Radio was government-run and there was no television until 1977, but there was a free press and dozens of private publications.

In fact, during Zahir's 40-year reign (1933–73) the country made efforts to join the modern world. However, the government was not sufficiently forward-looking in creating the institutions necessary to a modern state and a market economy. The roots of power of today's warlords lie in the arbitrary and ad hoc manner in which power and money were divided among the tribes by the monarchy. This pattern of customary patronage stood in place of an equitable and flexible structure for sharing power, resources, and responsibility. Under the monarchy, only those

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connected to power had power. In a subsistence economy without a dynamic private sector, control lay with the government, which collected taxes and received aid. Dividing this income was the prerogative of the royal family and its government, which also had an army ready to put down any resistance. In essence, the monarchy was an arrangement of convenience that failed when there was no longer enough money to go around.

As for Daoud's contribution, whatever his hopes for the country, he and his family were killed in the brutal communist takeover of 1978. So began Afghanistan's aberrant years.

Restoring the Afghan Economy

In monetary terms, "Afghanistan's economy is in a state of collapse" as the World Bank puts it.^{iv} Two decades of war and one of the worst droughts in the country's history have reduced Afghanistan to "one of the poorest and certainly one of the longest-suffering countries" among its members. An estimated seven million Afghans are vulnerable to famine. The Bank estimates Afghan annual per capita gross domestic product to be US\$141. Foreign food and other aid are the main sources of sustenance. Outside support for warlords is also a source, but it is unclear how much that is and who provides it.

The Bank says that in 1978, "Afghanistan was largely self-sufficient in food and was a significant exporter of agricultural products."^v However, even restoration to the 1978 level would leave Afghanistan one of the world's poorest countries. With an estimated farm value of \$1 billion in 2000,^{vi} opium poppies dominate crop production because they generate more income than any other crop. There are no estimates of the labor and job markets, but it appears that the majority of the labor force is idle.

As bleak as the economic picture appears, there is some semblance of resumption of economic activity, especially around Kabul, which now has a population of 1.5–2.0 million. The sale of fresh fruits and vegetables for cash in Kabul is a clear signal of what security means to returning economic production. Generators have been brought in to supply power in

the cities; demand exceeds supply. Cell phones have arrived in Afghanistan as have SUVs. But the Afghan national airline operates only one aircraft on its overseas routes, an old Boeing 727 that was grounded for years for lack of parts.

Rebuilding the economy requires peace and security throughout the country. Even with peace and security, the best economy Afghanistan can achieve will be mainly agriculture in the near term, some light industry in the medium term, and possibly tourism well down the road. There is also some potential deriving from future pipelines carrying oil and gas from Central Asia to the Arabian Sea or the Indian subcontinent through Afghanistan. But first an infrastructure of roads, dams, power plants, airports, and communications has to be put in place. It is to the country's advantage that there is no tradition of strict Islamic commercial law or an entrenched communal property system to impede economic development.

Restoration of agriculture is primary: Afghans must feed themselves and they can, because this is a nation of farmers. The villagers must be given grain and fertilizer now and a national program to survey and restore irrigation systems must be set up immediately. The villages first need food and water, then power, schools and, not incidentally, access to television. There are no large factories to be rebuilt but light industry should be encouraged. At one time Afghanistan made shoes, bicycles, and tractor parts. Afghan textiles can do well on world markets. However, the immediate challenge is to increase food and fiber production for consumption and generate cash income for farmers, who make up the vast majority of the work force.

There is no functioning labor market to absorb the unemployed: in economic terms, the discipline of the labor market does not exist. The workforce for rebuilding will be men and women who have known nothing but war and the Taliban for over two decades. Unless resources for rebuilding are made available around the country, skilled men will head for Kabul looking for work or they will take up their guns again. At the same time, it is essential that reconstruction aid not be funneled through the old tribal hierarchies whose leaders are now powerful warlords with their own agendas.

Reconstruction aid must not be funneled through the tribes whose leaders are warlords with their own agendas

Instead, reconstruction work such as rebuilding roads, dams, and power plants should be organized through the central government as work-for-pay. Job offices for major infrastructure projects should be set up with a non-Afghan supervisory presence to keep the job market free of patronage. Rules for a fair labor market should include a national minimum wage rate as well as prohibition of child labor to keep the children in school. Rural people have always resisted school, even for boys, as an interference in the family's production possibilities. Now the pressures will be greater than ever.

Building the Critical Institutions

The economic institutions needed to restart the country's production systems are a credible central bank, fair national and provincial tax systems, and labor market rules. But no reconstruction work can proceed until people feel safe. Total reconstruction is estimated to cost \$10–12 billion in the first five years. An international aid conference to rebuild Afghanistan was held in Tokyo in January 2002 and donors pledged \$1.8 billion for the first year of rebuilding, slightly more than the \$1.7 billion called for in the Preliminary Need Assessment.^{vii} Donors pledged a total of \$4.5 billion for the duration of the interim and transitional authorities (2002–2003) as outlined at the UN-sponsored Bonn Conference. This was somewhat less than the \$4.9 billion estimated in the assessment but close to the consensus estimate. The World Bank alone has pledged \$500 million for the first two to three years of reconstruction. But without law and order, the international community cannot complete the fulfillment of its obligations.

The federal government's authority will depend on a national army that can maintain law and order throughout the country, but this will not be in place any time soon. According to estimates of the transitional authority, 65,000–85,000 military personnel are needed. With warlords paying their soldiers more than the transitional government can, the government is having trouble finding recruits. This problem must be addressed quickly.

Warlords control most of the country and time may be on their side. The government's nominal control of Kabul depends on the 4,500-member International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). A larger ISAF, an expanded U.S. force or some combination, is needed to establish and maintain law and order until the government army can take over. Estimates range from 20,000 to 35,000 soldiers on the ground. The United States and the United Nations have been reluctant to become involved to this degree, but other than giving up most of the country to the warlords with all the risk entailed, there is no other option. Meanwhile, the failure to act is compromising the reconstruction.

The UN mandate requires that the political institutions of the new Afghan state be mapped out by the end of 2003, when the tenure of the transitional authority ends. By then, the new constitution is to be written and preparations for elections completed. Taking into account Afghan political realities, the new constitution will need to establish a strong federal system. The 30 provinces are already in place. Future elections should be held at regular intervals; the nuances of a parliamentary system are not for Afghanistan today, nor might they be for the next two or three generations.

Free elections of provincial and municipal leaders have never been held. Under the monarchy, provincial and municipal leaders were appointed by Kabul as they have been by the transitional authority. This practice produces conditions of mistrust and abuse of authority regardless of the size of a foreign security force. Elections will need close outside monitoring. Changes have to be made fast in a country where talent has been scattered abroad or denied training for decades. Advisory help is sorely needed.

USAID has made efforts to understand local conditions as they will affect its revitalization program, which covers agriculture, education, health needs, and institution building around the country.^{viii} Given the scope of the reconstruction and its funding requirements, a single U.S. agency is only part of the picture, and AID has had its people in Afghanistan finding out what it can reasonably do. At the same time, to

The failure to act is compromising reconstruction

all appearances very little deliberate effort is underway to substantiate the transitional authority, and it continues to be on lean rations given the work it is mandated to accomplish.

The authority of the government in Kabul will increase to the degree that is involved in the development and coordination of the reconstruction effort. Devising a reasonable balance between local and central governments is always a work in progress. Getting it right in Afghanistan today is critical, however difficult that may be under the circumstances that obtain, including the divisions within the transitional authority itself. More resources need to be applied to resolving this basic problem. With law and order, U.S. business can contribute to rebuilding Afghanistan and the region. A stable Afghanistan can play a role in the transfer of Central Asia's mineral resources to world markets.

The American Presence

The Bush administration has so far shown little enthusiasm for nation building as a long-term strategy to eliminate potential threats to U.S. security. But the logic of the war on terrorism is quantifiable: the cost of building and maintaining civil society in Afghanistan in the long run will be smaller than that of fighting terrorists, drug traffickers, and other global criminal elements who will take up residence in the country given the chance. Estimates of the total economic cost alone of the attacks on New York and Washington soon after they occurred ranged from \$100 billion to \$300 billion.^{ix} More recent estimates go as high as \$600 billion, excluding indirect costs to businesses and households. The estimated cost of rebuilding Afghanistan, on the other hand, ranges from \$10 billion to a maximum of \$30 billion in the next five to ten years.

As U.S. policy for Afghanistan evolves, one hopes it is headed toward a broader consensus on rebuilding as insurance that the country does not become a haven for international terror again. Now that the Taliban and Al Qaeda have been forced out, there are signs of willingness for a broader engagement in Washington. The Defense Department has softened

its opposition to expansion of the ISAF outside Kabul, but the administration has yet to decide what the United States will commit to the effort or what its scope should be. President Bush has called for a Marshall Plan for Afghanistan. However, specific elements of the plan or money for it have yet to follow.

Congress, on the other hand, has shown remarkably consistent support for both the war and Afghan rebuilding. In late July, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee unanimously passed the amended version of the Afghan Freedom Support Act of 2002 (S 2712). This bill is a companion to the Afghan Freedom Support Act passed by the House in May (HR 3994). The original version of the Senate legislation closely mirrored the House language. The amended form differs from the original and from the House version in two key provisions:

First, the Biden Amendment, which presses for ISAF expansion beyond Kabul and authorizes \$1 billion over two years to advance this goal. The amendment urges the president to use U.S. influence to expand ISAF by sponsoring the necessary UN resolutions and by enlisting U.S. allies to provide forces and financial and military support. Second, the amended bill more than doubles the original spending authorization on recovery aid, from \$1.15 billion to \$2.50 billion for fiscal years 2002–2005. The breakdown is \$500 million per year for fiscal years 2002–2005 (versus \$300 million per year for 2002–2004 and \$250 million for 2005 in the original draft) and another \$500 million (over three years) for an enterprise fund.

The administration has not backed up its evocation of George Marshall with the funds required by the task or the rhetoric. The increased funding authorized by the amended Senate bill would help keep the administration's promise to the Afghan people. As much as the bill represents a bipartisan achievement, it is far from becoming law. If it passes, it will be the most substantive congressional action on Afghanistan in years.

Right now the reconstruction of Afghanistan requires a stabilizing military presence, a disinterested but friendly advisory presence, and money. The objective is a reconstruction effort leading to independence and stability. While there are no guarantees,

The Kabul government's authority will increase to the degree that it is involved in the development and coordination of reconstruction

The U.S. has the most to gain by leading the rebuilding work

Afghanistan's chances will improve considerably if the United States puts more of its resources and influence to lead the effort on Afghanistan's behalf. For the United States, the issues involved are too urgent to be left to tradeoffs by international consortia or the manipulations of regional players. A long-term commitment to Afghanistan will introduce no new

constraints to America's ability to conduct its foreign policy in the region. As the target of choice for global terrorists, the United States has the most to gain by leading the rebuilding work to ensure that it stays on track. The success of this effort will be understood by Muslims everywhere.

Notes

ⁱ Holbrooke, Richard. "Rebuilding Nations," *The Washington Post*, Monday, April 1, 2002. Ambassador Holbrooke mentions South Korea as an example of U.S. success with nation building that has taken four decades and where 40,000 American troops remain stationed.

ⁱⁱ The author worked on the project as a member of the quality control team which checked the accuracy of field data. This required extensive travel throughout the country.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vafai, Gholam H. 1988. *Afghanistan: A Country Law Study*. Washington, DC: Law Library of Congress, pp. 10–14.

^{iv} World Bank. November 2001. *Afghanistan: World Bank Approach Paper*, p. 1.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} UN data cited in the US Agency for International Development (USAID) document, draft, July 2002. "Afghan Recovery and Reconstruction Strategy," p. 2.

^{vii} The Preliminary Need Assessment was prepared jointly by the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Program, and the World Bank.

^{viii} USAID. "Afghan Recovery and Reconstruction Strategy," p. 2.

^{ix} Mallay, Sebastian. "The Reluctant Imperialist: Terrorism, Failed States and the Case for American Empire," *Foreign Affairs*, March–April 2002, p. 2.

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About the Author

Wali M. Osman is Bank of Hawaii Senior Fellow for the Pacific Economies at the East-West Center where he has joint appointments in the Research Program and Pacific Islands Development Program (PIDP). He recently testified before a Congressional committee on the state of the Pacific economies. Osman was born and raised in Afghanistan. He received both his Master's and Ph.D. degrees in resource economics from the University of Hawaii through a scholarship from the East-West Center in 1976–80.

He can be reached at:

Telephone: (808) 944-7229

Facsimile: (808) 944-7670

Email: OsmanW@EastWestCenter.org