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"Counterinsurgency and Nation Building in Afghanistan: Challenges and Prospects "

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Counterinsurgency and Nation Building in Afghanistan: Challenges and Prospects

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It has become almost a commonplace observation that the gloomy situation in Afghanistan has reached a turning-point. Nonetheless, a range of recent developments suggest that Afghanistan has indeed reached a critical moment in its political development. The fraud-tainted presidential election of August 2009, President Obama's December 2009 speech foreshadowing a de-escalation of US troop numbers from 2011, and mounting calls for 'reconciliation' with the Taliban all point to a dramatic shift from the climate of optimism that prevailed at the time of the first presidential election in 2004, when according to an Asia Foundation survey, 64 per cent of Afghans felt that the country was moving in the right direction (Asia Foundation 2004). The dispiriting story of how the positive legacy of the Bonn Agreement of 2001 came to be squandered deserves to be told, if only as a warning for transitions in the future. But equally, it is important to note that not all is yet lost in Afghanistan, and that better international policy settings could offer better prospects for the future. Afghanistan's problem is not that the challenges that it faces are insuperable; it is rather that international action to help address those challenges in the political and diplomatic spheres has not been forthcoming. This paper is divided into four sections. The first outlines how Afghanistan's transition came to unravel. The second deals with the role played by sanctuaries for the Taliban in Pakistan in sustaining the insurgency by which Afghanistan is afflicted. The third addresses the question of whether 'reconciliation' with the Taliban is a wise objective to pursue. The fourth offers some brief conclusions.

I. The unravelling of the Afghan Transition

The overthrow of the Taliban regime in late 2001 provided a rare opportunity for a constructive partnership between Afghanistan and the international community to develop. In the 19ᵗʰ century, Afghans had notoriously resisted efforts by foreign forces to dominate their

country; for decades before the communist coup of April 1978, Afghanistan's foreign policy had been formally based on the doctrine of *bi tarafi*, or non-alignment; Soviet forces had encountered fierce resistance following their invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979. Yet in 2001, the story was different. Afghans, all too aware that their country had been blighted by proxy wars for most of the previous decade, stood ready to welcome international forces with open arms. Sadly, most Afghans were denied that opportunity. In March 2002, looking to conserve air lift assets for future use in Iraq, the Bush Administration consciously blocked the expansion beyond Kabul of members of the International Security Assistance Force whose deployment the Bonn Agreement had envisaged (Sipress, 2002). This deprived Afghanistan's transition of critical momentum at a crucial moment, and the subsequent Iraq operations sucked further oxygen from the Afghan theatre. The Afghanistan transition has never recovered from this fatal blunder (see Maley, 2006; Maley 2008).

A second problem related to the design of the state-building process in Afghanistan. The Bonn Agreement had much to commend it, but scant attention was paid by the signatories to what *kind* of state Afghanistan might require for the future. Arguably, Afghanistan would have been best served by a small, carefully-focussed state, with a limited number of well-resourced ministries — Finance, Education, Health, Transport, Foreign Affairs, and Agriculture — that could have performed important tasks effectively. Instead, the Bonn Agreement provided for up to 29 'Departments' of government, something which made it clear that ministries were regarded not as tools for public administration, but rather as rewards for the parties that had opted to sign the Agreement. This set the scene for nepotism within ministries and rivalries between them. It also meant that such a bloated state would likely be dependent on donor funding not just in the short term, but also in the long term.

A perverse (and unintended) consequence of these developments was that traditional tribal leaderships were substantially squeezed off the scene. The dependence of the state on donor funding led to the employment in the state of numerous expatriates and foreign consultants, often paid monumental salaries that were difficult to justify in terms of what they had to offer.

There was little room for traditional tribal leaders in this kind of state structure. Unfortunately, they were also often marginalised at the provincial and district level. Denied the benefits of ISAF expansion, President Hamid Karzai had few ways of dealing with local challengers to the state-building process except by finding space for them in the state itself. This dealt with his short-term problem, but at severe long-term cost. Not only did the predatory behaviour of these actors contaminate the reputation of the government which Mr Karzai headed, but their very presence in local positions blocked the tribal leaderships from access to formal roles at this level as well. Reconnecting with traditional tribal leaderships is an important task for any future Afghan government.

But a further and deeper problem also requires some attention. The strong presidential system that was established by the Afghan Constitution of 2004 has not served the country well. When countries have populations as segmented as the Afghan, there is a risk that a presidential system will leave many groups with the feeling that they have been marginalised — in contrast to parliamentary systems, which typically create a multiplicity of significant elected offices which diverse gropups may end up sharing. Beyond this, a presidential system can leave a single office holder groaning under the weight of unmanageable responsibilities. President Karzai is the *symbolic head of state*, and every important visitor to the country would therefore like to meet with him. He is also the *executive head of government*, expected to take the lead on policy development and implementation. Finally, he is the *ultimate arbiter in disputes* between different agencies within the Afghan government. Each of these is arguably a full-time occupation. Mr Karzai's tragedy is that the strengths that he initially displayed in the symbolic realm have become less important as time has gone by, and he has faced mounting expectations of achievement in the realm of policy. Yet having grown up in a 'state-free' environment in Peshawar in the 1980s, detailed policy development and implementation is not one of his strengths. This was disguised between 2002 and 2004 by the dynamism in the policy arena of his Finance Minister, Dr Ashraf Ghani, who had a very clear sense of what a state-building policy might involve (see Ghani and Lockhart, 2008), but with

Dr Ghani's departure from the government, there was no one comparable to supply this kind of vision.

The constitutional framework also provided stimulus for the fraud that marred the 2009 election. In a presidential system, a president is typically surrounded by a team of associates, sidekicks and cronies who stand to fall much further than the incumbent if there is a change of leader. They can have a strong incentive to try to work the system to their favour, and this is essentially what happened in 2009. With the percentage of those Afghans who felt that the country was moving in the right direction having fallen to just 42 per cent (Asia Foundation 2009), there was every reason to fear attempts to fake the election results on a massive scale. The consequences are more disturbing than seems yet to have been appreciated (see Ruttig 2009). While political legitimacy in Afghanistan depends on much more than electoral victory (see Maley 1987; Maley 2009a), the survival of the Karzai presidency on the strength of fraud leaves it ill-placed to play a leading role in overcoming problems of corruption and poor governance that threaten its legitimacy more directly.

II. The question of sanctuaries

Beyond all Afghanistan's internal problems, its transition has been blighted by a deterioration in security which is fundamentally external in origin. This is not a recent development, and long pre-dates the emergence of 'corruption' and 'poor governance' as major issues. As far back as September 2002, a bomb blast killed large numbers of Afghans in central Kabul, and on 27 March 2003, a Red Cross worker was deliberately killed by the Taliban near Kandahar (Maley 2003). As time went by, it became clear that while the Taliban regime had been obliterated, the Taliban movement had not, with the top leadership having found safe havens in Pakistan, alongside the radical *Hezb-e Islami* of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and an extremist network led by Jalaluddin Haqqani. President Pervez Musharraf of Pakistan, during an official visit to Afghanistan in August 2007, stated that 'There is no doubt Afghan militants are supported from Pakistani soil. The problem that you have in your region is because support is provided from our side' (Shah and Gall 2007). This dramatic admission confirmed

what a mountain of evidence has shown (see Gregory 2007; Johnson and Mason 2007; Johnson and Mason 2008; Rashid 2008; Jones, 2007; Jones 2008; Jones 2009; Maley 2009b: 259-264).

Pakistan's history of involvement with Afghanistan is long and complex (see Weinbaum 1994; Qassem 2007), but it suffices to note that for most of the three decades before the Afghan coup of April 1978, relations between the two countries were poor. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in December 1979, millions of Afghan refugees fled to Pakistan (see Kronenfeld 2008; Schmeidl and Maley 2008), and on the whole Pakistan proved to be a generous host. The refugee camps, however, provided support bases for the activities of the Afghan resistance against the Soviet presence (see Terry 2002: 55-82; Lischer 2005: 44-72), and Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence directorate (ISI), alert to the ways in which Afghan nationalism had contributed to the tense relations of the past, opted to favour resistance parties such as Hekmatyar's *Hezb* that promoted a more global agenda (see Abou Zahab and Roy 2004; Hussain, 2005). In 1994, Pakistan's support shifted to the new 'Taliban movement' (see Davis 1998), of which until September 2001 it was the principal and virtually sole backer.

The rationale for Pakistan's continuing support for the Afghan Taliban is itself complicated (Grare 2006: 8-15; Tellis 2008; 12). The desire to exclude Indian influence, the desire to have an instrument through which to influence Afghanistan if Western interest wanes, and a greater sympathy for radical forces on the part of Pakistan's military in the Zia and post-Zia era have all played a part. But as time has gone by, the United States has found itself more irked by the duplicity of Pakistan's 'two-track foreign policy toward Afghanistan' (Weinbaum and Harder, 2008: 27), which saw support for Western efforts offset by continuing covert support for the Taliban. Thus, in a January 2007 report to the US Congress, the US Director of National Intelligence described Pakistan as a country 'where the Taliban and al-Qa'ida maintain critical sanctuaries' (Negroponte, 2007: 5). And increasingly, US press reports, obviously relying on intelligence sources, linked the ISI directly to such terrorist activities as

the bombing of the Indian Embassy in Kabul in July 2008 (see Mazzetti and Schmitt 2008a; Mazzetti and Schmitt 2008b); one source has even quoted the Pakistan Army chief, General Ashfaq Kayani, as describing Jalaluddin Haqqani, in a May 2008 conversation with Musharraf, as a 'strategic asset' (Sanger 2009: 248).

The importance of sanctuaries for groups such as the Afghan Taliban cannot be underestimated. An externally-supported sanctuary can provide opportunities for recruitment of personnel, the development of logistics systems, and stockpiling of weaponry without much risk of effective counter-attack. (It has long been noted that the Taliban's military activities bear little resemblance to the notoriously-seasonal patterns of tribal conflict in Afghanistan, and instead reflect the tactics of conventional militaries mixed with those of asymmetric guerrillas.) Furthermore, sanctuaries provide cover for tactical retreat, and reports are legion of Western forces glaring impotently at Taliban retreating across the border into Pakistan. It is not surprising that the history of counterinsurgency provides relatively few examples of successful moves against an insurgent force with a reliable sanctuary, and it is for this reason that attention to the sanctuaries issue is pressing and urgent.

Closing the sanctuaries in Pakistan would help at one level by eliminating the specific advantages, just noted, that the Taliban enjoy because of them. However, there is another and arguably even more important benefit that would flow, in the area of psychology. Nothing could signal more clearly a genuine shift in Pakistan's orientation towards its region than the arrest of the Afghan Taliban leadership and the closure of their bases. While the Taliban receive income from the opium trade (Peters 2009), and have pursued strategies of bottom-up consultation with disaffected social groups (see Giustozzi 2009), neither of these would be sufficient to sustain the current insurgency if it lost its external bases. For Afghans, a move against the sanctuaries and the Afghan Taliban leadership would be almost the equivalent of what the fall of the Berlin Wall meant for Eastern Europeans, and the likely result would be the collapse of whatever prudential support the Taliban have been able to extract from communities within Afghanistan itself. Many observers have forgotten how quickly the

Taliban regime collapsed in 2001. Beyond this, it would also be a powerful confidence-building measure vis-à-vis India, and, especially if linked to moves against the terrorist group *Lashkar-e-Toiba*, it could set the scene for requests to India to find ways of reciprocating.

III. The question of reconciliation

Yet ironically, the sanctuaries issue is probably the most under-discussed dimension of the entire situation in Afghanistan. Instead of taking it up, Western leaderships have started instead down a very dangerous pathway, namely that of 'dialogue', 'negotiation', or 'reconciliation' with the Taliban. Most recently reflected in a so-called 'Peace Jirga' in Kabul (see Gall 2010; Londoño 2010), this approach has taken as its point of departure the proposition that there can be no 'military solution' to the Afghan conflict, and from there has moved straight to the claim that dialogue and negotiation should be countenanced. (In a way, this is hauntingly reminiscent of the approach to negotiation taken by the British Foreign Secretary Viscount Halifax in his fateful confrontation with Prime Minister Winston Churchill in the dark days of May 1940 (see Lukacs 1999)). The result has been that the sanctuaries issue has been largely overlooked. But there are a number of other reasons to be profoundly wary of the notion that anything good is likely to come from the rush to dialogue (see Maley 2007; Tellis 2009).

First, the Taliban themselves have shown no interest in becoming involved in a negotiation process, and displayed their scorn for Karzai's 'Peace Jirga' by rocketing its opening ceremony. As negotiating partners, they had proved utterly maddening when the UN tried to negotiate issues of humanitarian access with them in the 1990s (see Kleiner 2006; Donini 2007), displaying little commitment to any of the foundational norms of international engagement, and shifting their own positions as the mood took them. There is no reason to think that direct engagement with the Taliban would be any less frustrating or any more meaningful in the 21st century. Furthermore, to the extent that they are servants of Pakistan's interests, one might well ask the classic question why one should talk to the monkey when one can talk to the organ-grinder.

Second, even the *suggestion* that there should be dialogue or negotiation with the Taliban can have political consequences. In many parts of Afghanistan, international forces conceive their task as a struggle for the 'hearts and minds' of the Afghan people, naïvely using development assistance as an instrument (Wilder 2009). The hearts and minds of ordinary Afghans, however, are much less concerned with aid programs than with the question of which *political* forces are likely to emerge locally on top. The mere possibility that there could be a negotiation process that might put the Taliban in a dominant position in that locality may be enough to scare significant local figures away from backing the Afghan government and the local international forces: it could be a life-threatening step.

Third, it is far from clear what a process of dialogue or engagement would involve. Some discussions have emphasised the importance of winning over foot-soldiers, although it is hard to see that such an approach could address the problem of a flow of potential recruits from Deobandi madrassas across the border. Other approaches, including that of President Karzai, have focussed on the need for the cooptation of the Taliban leadership; indeed, he has recently begun to call them not 'terrorists' but 'angry brothers', a terminology guaranteed to infuriate those Afghans who suffered at the Taliban's hands before 2001 as well as those who continue to do so. It was to this end that the Afghan Government had sought to 'turn' the senior Taliban leader Mullah Abdul Ghani 'Baradar', but his arrest by the Pakistan authorities in February 2010 put paid to such schemes (Mazzetti and Filkins 2010), and incidentally demonstrated how closely the Afghan Taliban leaders are watched by their hosts. It should also be noted that incorporating an opponent in one's team can weaken rather than strengthen one's legitimacy; for example, in courting the *Hezb-e Islami* of Hekmatyar, Mr Karzai seems to have forgotten that attempts in the 1990s to turn Hekmatyar into a 'normal' politician had precisely this negative effect (see Maley 1993), and his appointment as Prime Minister in 1996 was the last nail in the coffin for the Rabbani Government.

Fourth, there is little reason to be confident that even the tenuous progress made in the sphere of human rights, especially for women and ethnic minorities, would survive a return of the

Taliban in any significant role. On issues of gender and sect, there is no credible evidence that the Taliban are any less rigid than they were in the past, and claims of Taliban transformation should be taken with a great deal of salt. In response to this obvious apprehension, proponents of negotiation have argued that the Taliban must commit to supporting the Afghan Constitution. In practice, this is hardly a red line of any significance. Even such explicit constitutional provisions as that which sets the date for the expiry of the president's term have been ignored on pragmatic grounds, and with the consent of international as well as local actors. Anyone who thinks that the Afghan Constitution would act as a restraint on predatory actions by the Taliban is living in a world far from Afghan reality.

Fifth, there are specific risks associated with attempting to lubricate a reconciliation process with *money*. As the communist leader Dr Najibullah discovered in 1992 when his regime lost access to Soviet funds, money in Afghanistan buys prudential compliance rather than loyalty or legitimacy. Billions of dollars have already been spent on reconstruction activities in Afghanistan that are supposed to generate employment and welfare (see Suhrke 2007), and the returns have been negligible, with money in many cases ending up fuelling corruption; it is far from clear that programs to reintegrate Taliban fighters would work any more effectively. But if by any chance they did, then a separate difficulty could arise, namely resentment on the part of those who had not resorted to violence, but could see rewards going to those who had. The last thing that Afghanistan needs is a new 'moral hazard' problem of this kind.

Sixth, it would pay to reflect on how other regional actors would respond if the Taliban were to return to a position of influence in Afghanistan. It is difficult to see that Moscow would feel thrilled by the prospect, and in Teheran, which nearly went to war with the Taliban in 1998 after Iranian consular staff were murdered in Mazar-e Sharif, the temptation to re-arm Afghan Shiite and non-Pushtun Sunni groups could be considerable. There is a real risk that 'reconciliation' with the Taliban could trigger a resumption of the mixed civil and transnational war that caused Afghanistan so much damage in the 1990s.

IV. Conclusion

This brings us back to the question of sanctuaries, and to three questions with which it would be useful to conclude: first, whether it is ultimately in Pakistan's *interests* to close the sanctuaries; second, whether it is within Pakistan's *abilities* to close the sanctuaries; and third, what political and diplomatic steps might be pursued to advance this objective.

As far as Pakistan's interests are concerned, it is necessary to draw some sharp distinctions. At the existential level, it is arguably not even *remotely* in Pakistan's interests to nurture groups like the Afghan Taliban. A comment made by Pakistan's Ambassador to the US in 2007, Mahmud Ali Durrani, bears repeating: 'I hope the Taliban and Pushtun nationalism don't merge. If that happens, we've had it, and we're on the verge of that' (quoted in Harrison 2009: 40). While Pakistan is not about to collapse (Cole 2009), the risk of Talibanisation in Pakistan has long been recognised (see Maley 2001; Goodson 2001), and in recent times, the Pakistan Taliban movement, very much a spin-off from the Afghan Taliban, has caused enormous grief and misery for ordinary Pakistanis, as well as significant casualties for the Pakistan military. It is also doubtful whether the civilian political establishment stands to gain from the presence of the Afghan Taliban: the assassination of Benazir Bhutto in December 2007 points to the risk that civilian politicians can face from religious and political extremism. But that said, it is not clear that the Pakistan military establishment, fixated as it is with India, is anywhere near ready to sever its ties with such groups, and movement on this front is urgently required.

As far as Pakistan's abilities are concerned, the arrest of Mullah Baradar should put an end to any serious doubts. To move against the Afghan Taliban, there is no need for a fully-fledged takeover of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, which indeed would pose a challenge. What is required is a targeted move against the Afghan Taliban leadership in Quetta, of whose whereabouts Pakistan's military leaders are undoubtedly aware. As the Taliban are an organisation with some ability to plug gaps that arise (see Sinno 2008), the one key

requirement is that a sweep be conducted against the entire leadership; it would not suffice to pick them off one by one.

As far as political and diplomatic means are concerned, the problem is largely one of Western will. The British Government under Prime Ministers Blair and Brown was deeply reluctant to apply any pressure to Pakistan, fearing (understandably) that police cooperation seen as vital in the wake of the July 2005 London bombings might be compromised. Successive US Administrations, too, have opted for 'soft' ways of dealing with Pakistan, although at substantial financial cost and with little to show at the end of the day (see Cohen and Chollet 2007); and there are signs that the US military leadership itself prefers to continue a 'constructive engagement' with its Pakistani counterparts. This is a classic example of the triumph of hope over experience. The one example of a serious positive shift in Pakistan's position occurred following the issue of a ferocious US demarche to Islamabad after the September 11, 2001 attacks (and even this shift was not sustained over time, as Washington moved prematurely to the use of positive incentives). Pakistan is in fact vulnerable to a range of pressures which could easily be privately foreshadowed, more in sorrow than in anger, and the stakes are so high that such an approach is certainly worth trying. Those who argue for caution need to recall that almost two decades of constructive engagement have led nowhere, and should also reflect on whether a Talibanised Afghanistan, with a real risk of a Talibanised Pakistan to follow, is a pleasant option. But that said, *if* Pakistan finally takes steps in the right direction, there is no reason why this should not open the door for an active diplomacy to address the interlocking security dilemmas of the wider South and Southwest Asian regions, in the resolution of which Pakistan undoubtedly has a genuine interest (see Rubin, Ghani, Maley, Rashid and Roy 2001; Maley 2009c).

Above all, it is necessary to approach the sanctuaries issue from a starkly realistic perspective (see Grare 2007), and not be put off by duplicitous denials that there is a problem. Here it is worth recalling a sobering anecdote told by former US Secretary of State George Shultz about a conversation between President Ronald Reagan and President Zia ul-Haq at the time of the

1988 Geneva Accords on Afghanistan: 'I heard the president ask Zia how he would handle the fact that they would be violating their agreement. Zia replied that they would "just lie about it. We've been denying our activities there for eight years"' (Shultz 1993: 1091: see also Nawaz 2008: 390). A policy towards Afghanistan that is premised on the need to give credit to lies is one truly built on sand.

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