

TRANSCRIPT

Rebuilding Afghanistan

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President Bush has recognized that the U.S. has to do more than "just simply leave after a military objective has been achieved" in the war against Osama bin Laden and the Taliban. We must, he said, "work for a stable Afghanistan."

This assertion of intent is welcome, but turning it into a reality won't be easy. How will the U.S. bring stability there, and with whose help? In his press conference on Thursday, Mr. Bush gave us only a brief glimpse of a possible road map. He suggested that "the United Nations could provide the framework necessary to meet those conditions." He also stated that "all parties" should be included in a future government.

The Northern Alliance

This is a new development, and a sign that the administration is thinking on its feet. After all, U.S. officials had previously stated that Washington wants to help those Afghans who fight the Taliban, emphasizing in particular the Northern Alliance, the only group currently with troops in the field. Many statements implied that the U.S. wanted that group -- a congeries of Tajik ex-mujahidin, Uzbek ex-communist militias, Shiite Muslims from the long-suppressed Hazara ethnic group, and other warlords emeritus -- to capture Kabul and thus end Taliban rule.

Such statements set off alarm bells not only in Pakistan -- which regards the Northern Alliance as a hostile force -- but also within the Alliance itself. Human rights organizations have pointed out that the Alliance destroyed Kabul and alienated the country's largest ethnic group, the Pashtuns, the last time they controlled the capital. Responsible Alliance leaders do not want to repeat these mistakes. They know they cannot govern Afghanistan themselves, which is why they signed an agreement with the former king, Zahir Shah, to convene a loya jirga, or grand council. That council has figured in all previous constitutions, and has considerable support among Pashtuns, including those from the Taliban home base of Kandahar.

Northern Alliance spokesman have told us that they are worried about a premature collapse of the Taliban. Activists in the loya jirga movement have expressed the same fear. Alliance leaders do not want to enter Kabul, for fear of setting off another round of civil war, but both factionalism in their ranks and attempts by Pakistan to position new clients may force them to move. Supporters of a loya jirga also claim that they still face Pakistani resistance, and that they need funds, communications equipment, and high-level, visible support to succeed.

What Mr. Bush has now proposed is what both the Alliance and loya jirga advocates have wanted the U.S. to do, which is to mobilize the U.N., along with other states and international organizations, to undertake essential tasks. These include helping Afghans form an inclusive transitional administration under a U.N.

mandate; demilitarizing Kabul; providing local security; and moving from relief to reconstruction. Neighboring countries, whose cooperation the U.S. needs, also seek a role for the U.N.

The reappointment of Lakhdar Brahimi as the U.N. secretary general's special representative on Afghanistan can make this possible. Mr. Brahimi, a former foreign minister of Algeria, will be responsible for both political and humanitarian efforts, including planning for reconstruction. The weakness of Afghan leadership at this point requires extensive external support, and he has the skills to lead that effort. President Bush is right that the U.S. should not take the lead in "nation-building." The U.N., with full American and allied support, would bring greater legitimacy to the effort in the eyes of the Afghans and their neighbors.

A U.N. mission with a strong mandate can support the efforts to form a Supreme Council and establish its legitimacy through an emergency loya jirga. Pakistan should have no role in choosing Afghanistan's future leaders, but its interests must be respected. The U.S. and the U.N. must assure that future Afghan governments work with Islamabad on developing their frontier into a zone of mutual cooperation. Both for the sake of justice and to satisfy Iranian concerns, the Shiite population must receive appropriate recognition of their distinct legal traditions.

That political effort would need to start with a small and decentralized transitional administration. Security will be key to its effectiveness and legitimacy. No one -- not the U.S. and not the U.N. -- can place Afghanistan under a transitional administration like Kosovo or East Timor, both of which were effectively occupied by international forces. Instead, security will require two efforts.

First, the demilitarization of Kabul -- the only city that belongs to the nation, and not just to an ethnicity -- can keep it from becoming an ethnic flashpoint. Muslim peacekeepers, perhaps led by Turkey, could surround it, while former Afghan police, under international supervision, maintain internal security. Second, security teams can work with local leadership to calm the situation in the districts.

The massive humanitarian program now underway must soon start a transition to reconstruction. If Afghanistan passes through a winter of war and chaos, hundreds of thousands risk death by starvation and exposure. The internally displaced people and the isolated Hazaras in the central highlands are most at risk. Though Iran protested the U.S. bombing, it could help the U.N. start an air bridge of humanitarian aid to that area.

Reconstruction planning and commitment of funds have to start now. Major donor countries must deposit cash in a trust fund and involve Afghan experts -- mostly now in exile or working for international agencies -- in a comprehensive planning effort. Release of money from the trust fund can be linked to results on the ground.

Afghans want to know that the international community will stick by them if they take risks. They feel abandoned, having given over a million lives and most of their wealth to defeat the Soviets. Abandoning Afghanistan again will push more people into embitterment.

Rebuild Infrastructure

Reconstruction must secure an administration in Kabul that lifts people through education and health care, and that rebuilds infrastructure so Afghans can earn their living through the private sector. Afghans already run trading networks, often illicit, from the Persian Gulf to South Asia. Rehabilitated agriculture and pastoralism can produce fruit and vegetables for sale to Iran, cupflowers for Europe, and meat for South Asia.

Afghanistan's neighbors stand to benefit. Pakistan, in particular -- if it succeeds in defining its national interest in a way that does not require it to subvert its neighbors by arming extremist militias -- could transform its historically hostile relations with Afghanistan. Reconstruction would stimulate Pakistani business and reinforce healthy economic interdependence between the two countries.

Much of this may sound unrealistic. The alternative -- Afghanistan's disintegration into chaos and famine - is only too realistic. But events of the past month also defied realistic scenarios. Defeating the terrorists requires an imagination and daring that surpasses theirs. We owe it to the Afghans, and we owe it to ourselves.

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