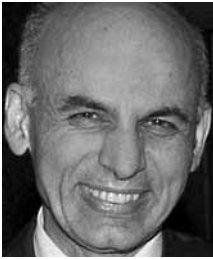


Rescue plan for an Afghanistan perilously close to its tipping point



The past six years have seen a succession of political errors, neglect and missed opportunities, says **Ashraf Ghani**, Afghanistan's former Finance Minister. He sets out his proposals for a 10 year recovery strategy to bring it back from the brink

When it comes to gaining the world's attention, countries in conflict rarely get a second chance. Afghanistan has been defying the odds because it is the focus of renewed global attention thanks to the threat posed by the terrorist networks there that are dedicated to proliferating global disorder.

The international forces now helping the people of Afghanistan to confront the threat are a major resource, and the Afghans, too, have assets – ranging from a strong desire of the people to be part of the global economy, to significant mineral and water resources and to their country's location as the land bridge between south and central Asia and the Middle East.

But neither these international assets nor the Afghan ones will be of much use unless we define our goals very clearly and establish the right balance between our use of force and our deployment of resources.

And to do that means we have to achieve a paradigm shift from tactical improvisation to strategic coherence. Tailoring a strategy for resolving Afghanistan's difficulties means that first we have to understand the limits of force, and second that we have to draw a realistic scorecard of the last six years.

The use of force was essential to loosening Al-Qaeda's stranglehold on Afghanistan. Afghans welcomed the present military assistance as an act of liberation, with the children of Kabul rushing to greet the ISAF soldiers. The country was ready to entrust the legitimate monopoly of force to international forces until the Afghan state was itself able to take on that responsibility. Unwilling to make the commitment to deployment of forces to guarantee stability nation-wide, the international community instead adopted a multi-pronged approach: Operation Enduring Freedom focused on the elimination of terrorism and ISAF, whose command was taken on by NATO, dealt with

the security of Kabul under a UN mandate. The US, Germany, and Italy assisted with building up the Afghan army and police, and the reform of the judicial sector. Strongmen allied to the coalition were at first given a free hand to arm, and then asked to demobilise. Last year, the first two of these operations were largely unified under a single command, while the third component has advanced less satisfactorily, having received the least amount of resources.

A country's army derives its legitimate monopoly of the use of force from its status under the rule of law. In Afghanistan, however, the legal status of use of force has become increasingly problematic. Forced entry into houses, arrests and the bombardment of civilian targets have become legal enigmas that puzzle and deeply upset the Afghan population. With people being arrested by the international forces and then released without due process of law, the legal status of Afghanistan's government as guarantor of the country's sovereignty is increasingly open to question by its opponents. The whole problem is being compounded by the absence of serious investment in the police, the slow pace of expansion of the national army, the continued impunity of strongmen accused of violations of human rights, and the weakness and corruption of the judiciary. The willingness of Afghans to cede to the international forces the legitimate monopoly of force is now looking very close to its tipping point.

There are other pertinent factors. The paradigm of what British General Sir Rupert Smith has called "industrial warfare", is ill-suited to military operations against terrorist

networks. And even if the paradigm were valid in Afghanistan's case, the international community would not be able to commit enough troops to conquer the country by force; the Red Army, despite its brutal pursuit of total war, signally failed to win by using those methods. Securing Afghanistan's future means placing the use of force within a much broader strategy of creating stability through prosperity.

There are six lessons from the last six years. First, the political process of creating a legitimate central authority succeeded because that goal was clearly articulated, the process well delineated, the rules of the game and the play carefully choreographed, the process properly refereed, and steady momentum toward meeting the goal of empowering the Afghan people maintained. In three years, Afghanistan moved from being a pariah country to having the first democratically-elected president in its history.

Second, a series of national programmes were built, ranging from telecoms where significant amounts of foreign direct investment were attracted to rural development, where a programme of block grants to villages showed that institutions could be created through creation of stakeholders in the process of governance. Afghanistan's partners included institutions like the World Bank and the European Commission and the Canadian, Dutch, British and Scandinavian governments.

Third, the business practices of the UN and some other partners imposed severe coordination costs on the Afghan

government, resulting in the creation of parallel organisations to the government itself and provoking a loss of trust in the accountability and transparency of the aid system.

Fourth, supply-driven wasteful technical assistance became the norm. The result was that investment in higher education was neglected, leaving Afghanistan's youth with no credible mechanism of upward social mobility, and therefore no strong sense of ownership of the development process.

Fifth, there was a failure of imagination to help the Afghans design an effective economic approach for dealing with the narcotics threat. The ill-advised eradication plan was probably an important factor in creating the alliance between the drugs and terror networks and therefore of making corruption in the legal and security organs a national disease.

Sixth and most important of all, the goal of building a state that would have legitimacy at home and abroad was subordinated to the fragmented national and international "organisational stovepipes" of Afghanistan's international partners. It seemed quickly forgotten that the Afghan people were keenly monitoring developments, and becoming increasingly disenchanted.

A vicious circle has been created of youth unemployment, weak governance, cynicism about the aid system, a distrust of UN agencies and the NGOs and a

widening gap between Afghanistan's haves and have-nots. The early momentum and trust have now been lost, but at least the renewed international focus on this country is providing an opening for a new path to medium-term stability. Regaining trust and momentum requires a strategic coherence capable of producing visible results on

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the ground. International agreement on the goal of assisting Afghans to build a functioning state and a vibrant economy is the key to achieving that strategic coherence. In turn, that means that to win the battle for Afghanistan we need consensus that a minimum of 10 years will be needed to set

innovative mechanisms in place.

The new mechanisms Afghanistan needs are as follows:

- To create predictability, reduce coordination costs, and establish clear accountability mechanisms, all assistance should be channelled through a single multi-donor trust fund. This should be endowed with specially crafted rules and its own on-the-spot management team.
- A series of carefully crafted national programmes can then be designed to generate wealth and deliver services to Afghan citizens. Each program would have agreed upon criteria of accountability, efficiency, and transparency and one of the programs would focus on implementation of a rigorous national system of accountability to promote the rule of law and good governance.

- Because feasibility studies have been a constraint blocking the start of major infrastructure projects, countries whose military have an infrastructure design capacity should be called on to assist in this vital area. Rules for the allocation of funds should be drafted in such a manner as to permit multi-year commitments for major infrastructure projects.

Winning hearts and minds in Afghanistan requires at least two years of focus. In the first place, that means an ambitious programme of investment in technical and higher education to provide Afghanistan's youth with the skills to compete in the market and the commitment to function as citizens of a democratic government displaying high values of tolerant Islamic civilisation. It will also require an innovative programme for empowering people in the border regions of the country, particularly in the conflict-riven south, to bind them through solidarity ties to the rest of the country.

Building a market economy requires substantial investment in market institutions as well as access to regional and global markets. Investing in Afghanistan's construction industry is an essential first step towards greater economic efficiency, a reduction of security costs and the creation and maintenance of crucially important infrastructure. More jobs will be critical to Afghanistan's future stability, and only corporations know how to create jobs.

But the proper assessment of risk and the development of risk guarantees, coupled with incentives to attract international partners for Afghan entrepreneurs and the government, are all much-needed building blocks.

Afghanistan's geographical location can also be turned into a major asset if it can fashion a development strategy capable of yielding regional synergies with the rapidly growing economies of south Asia, China and the Gulf. Above all, predictable policies and rule of law are needed to foster development of the country's mineral resources.

Afghanistan today needs much the same sort of imagination that helped Europeans to create prosperity out of the ashes of World War II. Many Afghans stand ready to explore ground-breaking new approaches to partnerships with the international community so as to tackle the twin problems of violence and narcotics. The lives of Afghans themselves and of the international soldiers now deployed around the country will depend on the willingness of world leaders to seize the initiative. NATO's own future also depends to a large degree on their political will to act as the essential catalysts in a compact with the people of Afghanistan. □

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