



Unraveling THE Tangle OF Foreign Policy

How do you help a developing nation form a stable government and meet its people's basic needs? It's a tough question to answer, especially when the country is beset by conflict and chaos, fractured by tribal, ideological, and religious division, and destabilized economically and politically.

Bill Frej seeks to answer that question. Frej, the former mission director for Afghanistan at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), is spending a year in Santa Fe as SFI's first Diplomat in Residence, working with researchers to explore the interface between science and national policy. At a more applied level, he hopes to use SFI-style thinking to unravel foreign policy dilemmas relating to the complex systems that are Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Middle East in general.

Here are some of his thoughts:

BULLETIN: You've been a USAID official in Afghanistan during the war, in Indonesia during and after the 2004 tsunami, in Poland after the fall of the Iron Curtain, and in many other places. You've also spent time in the White House as a National Security Council director during the buildup to the Iraq war. You've seen some major transitions in foreign policy. What have you learned?

BILL FREJ: One of the areas I've been focusing on in my career is conflict. My time in a number of conflict-prone countries has been sobering and has raised many questions. How do you work to prevent conflict in these countries? I think the academic establishment as a whole can really lend focus to this question. Clearly Afghanistan is a world locus of conflict.

LAURA WARE

The work the U.S. is doing there both on the civilian and military sides is key to peace and stability in the world. It is critically important that we understand this issue and this place much better than we have in the past.

BULLETIN: What did you take away from your 15 months in Afghanistan, just prior to coming to SFI?

FREJ: The Afghan people want the same things we want. They want education for their children and healthcare for their families. They want peace and security. But they are caught among a number of outside forces, and they have been for the past 35 years: the Russian invasion, a major civil war, the entrenchment of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, and a war that began in 2001 that is still being fought 10 years later.

Geopolitically that country is being acted on by forces from all sides. The Iranian influence is very heavy in the west, the central Asian influence is very heavy in the north, and Pakistan and India are to the east. I think Afghanistan could again become a safe haven for terrorism. And when you have nuclear powers to the east and, potentially, to the west, Afghanistan becomes very important not only for the U.S. but for the world.

BULLETIN: In the foreign policy arena, where are the opportunities for complexity thought to have an impact?

FREJ: Certainly foreign policy today is a very complex endeavor. In terms of global sustainability, conflict, and urbanization, complexity science can contribute. Specifically with Afghanistan and Pakistan, there is nothing from a policy maker's perspective more complex than those two countries: their interactions internally among tribes and cultures, their interactions with their external neighbors, and their interactions with the

world community. The whole overlay is complex as well, with terrorists trying to affect their way of life. These are all critical issues that need to be better assessed, better analyzed. From my personal perspective, we need different tools to help make and define foreign policy.

BULLETIN: Why did you choose to spend a year at the Santa Fe Institute at this point in your career, at this point in the evolution of U.S. foreign policy?

FREJ: I hope to utilize the intellectual power of this preeminent institution and the people working here to look at foreign policy in Afghanistan through a different lens. The faculty here at SFI, as well as many academics, including those that USAID is reaching out to, can be a very positive force in looking at the problem through a more scientific, evidence-based, responsible lens than in the past. The findings can help the policy makers define our next steps.

Afghanistan's culture is also extremely complex because it is based on a tribal structure. It seems a lot of the work being done here on tribes—the work that SFI Professor Paula Sabloff and SFI President Jerry Sabloff are doing, for example—can really help contribute to a better understanding of the roles tribes play in helping define a country's



In 1996 the Taliban regime banned education for Afghan girls, but now schools are open to them, though many obstacles still exist.

culture, direction, and political context. I would hope to be able to reach out to the anthropological elements, the social science elements, of SFI to help define foreign policy in the future.

Also, I think the conflict team that has been established here under the guidance of Faculty Chair David Krakauer and Professor Jessica Flack [see page 28] can help us look at conflict in a different way. This research-based, modeling-based focus can be very useful to exactly what is going on in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Middle East generally today. There is a great deal of value in looking at animal behavior, and at societal behav-

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ior, and using the new insights that come from that conversation. There is a real conflict going on in Afghanistan. Men and women are getting killed every day. Civilians are getting killed every day. Looking at this more holistically can be extraordinarily helpful to both the civilian and military policy makers.

BULLETIN: What do you, coming from the policy arena, bring to the theoretical research table?

FREJ: Scientists through their research can tell you the true state of play. Policy makers can use that truth to help formulate foreign policy. I think the intersection between these two worlds is very important, and I hope to work with the researchers here to help define a better connection between theory, truth, and policy.

Another important contribution I hope to make

is “ground truthing.” There is a project going on here right now interpreting some extremely involved data from Afghanistan. Some of the faculty here have come to me and said, “Is this really what’s happening? Does this really make sense?” And I’ve been able to offer some insights.

BULLETIN: Why SFI and not an academic think tank?

FREJ: I’ve been coming to Santa Fe for 30 years, and I’ve always been intrigued by the work being done at SFI. When I was looking for a next assignment, and when I saw how the Institute had begun to take a more focused interest in the social sciences and in informing policy, I couldn’t think of a better place to be.

At the same time a major change was going on in the U.S. government and at USAID. President Obama has a keen interest in using science and research to help formulate policy, both domestic and foreign. The new administrator of USAID, Dr. Rajiv Shah, is a medical doctor with a very strong scientific background. He wants to build a much stronger scientific and technical capacity for USAID. In September I was in Washington for USAID’s first evidence-based summit, and the focus was counter-terrorism and insurgencies. So things are changing, and I was lucky enough to be able to make arrangements with both USAID and SFI to come here to tackle some key questions.

BULLETIN: What are your impressions of this place?

FREJ: Managing 520 staff and a \$4.5 billion budget in Afghanistan, I really never had the luxury or the time to sit back and reflect on what we’re doing, what adjustments we could make in the way we operate. The environment here, the time to think, to read, to look at the data, to share ideas, is very conducive to a much broader perspective on world issues, on how we can really make a difference. Coming out of a long foreign service career, that luxury is something special. This is the first time I’ve experienced this kind of environment since my early academic career when I was at UC Berkeley in the early ’70s.



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BULLETIN: What projects are you spending time on?

FREJ: I'm planning a working group and a workshop. The first will look at how short-term civilian and military interventions can lead to long-term sustainable development programs in conflict-prone countries, focusing initially on Pakistan and Afghanistan. We'll bring together academics and senior policy makers with SFI faculty and spend three days drilling down into these issues. I hope we'll begin to find ways to inform the policy-making process for our colleagues in Washington.

The second major issue in Afghanistan right now is the judicious use of unexploited natural resources, estimated at between one and 13 trillion dollars. This is a phenomenal foundation for economic growth in that country. But the question some of the senior ministers in Afghanistan now have is whether their country becomes another Angola or Congo, two countries that have not done a very good job of using their natural resources for the benefit of their own people. Or does it become a Botswana, a country that in terms of diamond exploitation *has* benefitted its people.

The policy makers want to make the right decisions. There is no legal framework in place. There is no regulatory framework in place. Afghanistan

Frej will coordinate a workshop on how Afghanistan can use its abundant natural resources to benefit Afghans.

is getting pressure from China and Iran both to do more in terms of resource use outside of a framework of law and regulation. They need a framework that will benefit the people of that country, not line the pockets of a few. So we will focus the second workshop on how Afghanistan uses its resources for the benefit of Afghans.

BULLETIN: What do you hope the outcome of your year at SFI will be?

FREJ: This is an extraordinarily talented group of people. Some of the work that is underway here is really groundbreaking and clearly at the cutting edge of what the top minds in the world are thinking today. The theoretical research being done here is critically important. Most notable is the clear definition of how conflict impacts the entire world from many different perspectives, and how this can help us look at foreign policy through a different lens, and then also help define foreign policy. Hopefully while I am here there will be a uniting of science and policy that will contribute to making this world a much better place. ◀