7. The Second War Against the Taliban and the Struggle to Rebuild Afghanistan

Allied commanders and diplomats who arrived in Afghanistan in January 2002 were astounded at the devastation brought about by over two decades of war. The economy and society also suffered mightily from 5 years of Taliban mismanagement and authoritarian rule, further complicated by years of drought. The country they found was only 30 percent literate, and 80 percent of its schools had been destroyed in various wars. The Taliban severely restricted female education and did little for that of males. Twenty-five percent of all Afghan children died before the age of five. Only 9 percent of the population had access to health care. The professional and blue collar work forces had virtually disappeared.[1] The former Afghan finance minister and noted scholar Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, a British development expert, wrote that:

> *Between 1978, when the Communist coup took place, and November 2001, when the Taliban were overthrown, Afghanistan (according to a World Bank estimate) lost $240 billion in ruined infrastructure and vanished opportunities. While the rest of the world was shrinking in terms of spatial and temporal coordination, the travel time between Kabul and every single province in the country significantly increased. Whereas it used to take a minimum of three hours to reach the city of Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan and six hours to get to the city of Kandahar in the south, in 2002 the roads were so bad that it took fourteen hours to reach Jalalabad and nearly twenty-four hours to get to Kandahar. Millions of Afghan children grew up illiterate in refugee camps,*

where they learned that the gun rather than the ballot was the key instrument for the acquisition of power and influence.[2]

Starting from the rock bottom in nearly every category, the government of Afghanistan and its coalition partners had a relatively easy time from 2002 to 2004. Progress was made in security, stabilization, and economic reconstruction. From 2003 to 2005, the U.S. leadership team, led by Ambassador Khalilzad and General Barno, focused on teamwork and elementary organization for counterinsurgency operations, albeit with very small forces. LTG Barno unified the field commands and divided the country into regional areas of responsibility where one colonel or general officer would command all maneuver units and PRTs.

Pursuant to the U.S. initiative and a series of NATO decisions, ISAF's mandate was increasingly enlarged until it took over all of the regions of Afghanistan. In the fall of 2004, NATO and ISAF took charge of the regional command in the north. In the spring of 2006, they took over the west. That summer, ISAF control moved into the south, and in the fall it took over fighting and peacekeeping in the east, marking ISAF command over coalition forces in the entire country. By 2006, most U.S. forces were put under the new, enlarged, and empowered ISAF. While NATO's action brought the Alliance on line in Afghanistan, it also magnified the issue of national "caveats" identified by capitals to limit the activities of their forces. Many NATO nations do not allow their forces to engage in offensive combat operations. The United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Denmark, the Netherlands, and a few others did most of the fighting and combat advising.[3]

From 2003 to 2005, the relationship between Ambassador Khalilzad and President Karzai was very close and productive. The government of

Afghanistan, with much help from the international community, conducted nationwide loya jirgas (2002, 2003), passed a modern constitution modeled on the 1964 Afghanistan constitution, and held fair presidential and parliamentary elections in 2004 and 2005, respectively.[4] Sadly, the new constitution was highly centralized and gave the president much of the power that the king held in the constitutional monarchy. While the Kabul government was weak, it was responsible for policy and all significant personnel appointments. Warlords still played major roles, but with Japanese funding and UN leadership, the central government confiscated and cantoned all heavy weapons. This process was called disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. By mid-2004, major fighting between warlords with heavy weapons was no longer an important issue.

Afghanistan attracted a fair amount of international aid, but far less than the Balkan nations did after their conflicts in the 1990s. U.S. security and economic assistance from 2002 to 2004 was a modest $4.4 billion, but nearly two-thirds of it went to economic assistance, leaving slightly more than a third for security assistance. From 2002 to 2004, the average yearly U.S. security and economic assistance, per capita, was only $52 per Afghan.[5] RAND experts contrasted that with nearly $1,400 per capita for Bosnia and over $800 in Kosovo in their first 2 years.[6] The Bush administration had hoped that the United Nations and the IFIs would lead reconstruction and stabilization. It learned that the international actors would only follow in areas where the United States led. Initiatives by so-called lead nations generally proved disappointing. The lack of progress in the development of the police, counternarcotics, and promotion of the rule of law was particularly noteworthy.

On the security front, the build-up of the Afghan National Army was slow but deliberate. The ANA was small but successful and popular among the people. Police development in the first few years was very slow and unproductive, except in the German-sponsored education of commissioned officers. By 2008, 70 percent of U.S. funds went to security assistance or counternarcotics. The figures in the table on page 69 do not include America's expenditures on its own forces, which dwarfed funding for security and economic assistance to Afghanistan.

In the early years, under the guidance of Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani, the Afghan government swapped out the several currencies in use across the country, established a single stable currency, negotiated international contracts for a nationwide cellular phone service, and began economic reconstruction. With the help of the international community, there was rapid reconstruction in health care and education. The United States and international financial institutions began to rebuild the Ring Road, furthering travel and commerce. Access to medical care was extended from 9 percent of the population under the Taliban to 85 percent by 2010.[7] Spurred by foreign aid, rapid legal economic growth began and has continued, but it exists alongside a booming illegal economy marked by bribery, smuggling, and narcotics trafficking.

To make up for inherent weakness in the Afghan government, various countries, following the U.S. lead, set up Provincial Reconstruction Teams. The generic purposes of the PRTs were to further security, promote reconstruction, facilitate cooperation with NGOs and IOs in the area, and help the local authorities in governance and other issues. These small interagency elements were initially established in a third of the provinces but now can be found nearly nationwide. These 26 teams—half led by U.S. allies—today play a key role in reconstruction

and development. PRTs consist of a headquarters, a security element, and civil affairs teams, as well as diplomats, aid and assistance experts, and, where possible, agricultural teams. Also, without a nationwide peacekeeping force, these teams were often the only way diplomats and government aid professionals could get out to the countryside. From 2002 to 2009, the U.S.-hosted PRTs have been instrumental in disbursing nearly $2.7 billion in Commander's Emergency Response Program funds and other PRT-designated moneys.[8]

PRTs have been a positive development. They have, however, exacerbated civil-military tensions within the U.S. Government and led to recurring problems with international financial institutions and NGOs, which are still not used to having military forces in the "humanitarian space." Some donors found the PRTs a convenient excuse to ignore the need to build Afghan government capacity. While many observers objected to the military flavor of the teams, the need for strong security elements dictated that role. Regional commanders after 2004 controlled maneuver forces and PRTs in their region.[9] "In 2009, the U.S. Ambassador put civilian leadership at the brigade and Regional Command levels, creating a civilian hierarchical structure that mirrors the military [chain of command]."[10] The concept of PRTs was later exported to Iraq, where they were put under State Department management. There, some PRTs were geographic and others were embedded with troop units. Post-2009, the U.S. Government has also used District Support Teams in Afghanistan, with representatives from State, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Department of Agriculture. These teams go with deployed military units or other security elements to hot spots to work directly with Afghan government representatives. There were 19 of these teams in Regional Command East (RC–E) alone. In a similar vein, the U.S. National Guard fielded nine Agribusiness

	2002–2004	2005–2006	2007–2008		Percent 2002–2004	Percent 2005–2006	Percent 2007–2008
Security	**1,484**	**4,296**	**10,194**		**34**	**51**	**64**
ANA	1,166	2,369	6,650		26	28	42
ANP	184	1,841	3,487		4	22	22
Other Security	134	86	57		3	1	0
Counternarcotics	**169**	**880**	**947**		**4**	**10**	**6**
Interdiction	80	475	574		2	6	4
Eradication	89	395	360		2	5	2
Other CN	0	10	13		0	0	0
Dev/Hum	**2,772**	**3,247**	**4,808**		**63**	**39**	**30**
Dem/Gov	425	303	655		10	4	4
Reconstruction	1,275	1,946	2,636		29	23	17
Alt Livelihood	0	315	409		0	4	3
Rule of Law	44	51	191		1	1	1
Hum/Other	1,028	632	917		23	8	6
Total	**4,425**	**8,423**	**15,949**		**100**	**100**	**100**

Source: U.S. Embassy Kabul, 2009, provided by Ambassador William Wood.

U.S. Aid to Afghanistan

(All accounts, by fiscal year, in $US millions, including supplementals)

Development Teams with military and state university agronomists to help Afghan agriculture and animal husbandry enter the 21st century.

In terms of reconstruction and development, the coalition, reinforced by the United Nations and international financial institutions, did yeoman's work and markedly improved Afghanistan's lot. Through the end of fiscal year (FY) 2009, nearly $40 billion in U.S. foreign and security assistance were pledged or delivered. Other nations and international financial institutions delivered at least $14 billion in economic assistance through FY08. There is no reliable source for what U.S. allies spend on security assistance.[11] This huge sum for economic and security assistance, however, comes to only a few hundred dollars per Afghan per year.

Progress in health care, road building, and some areas of agriculture has been excellent. A RAND study, citing NATO statistics, noted that the military and development wings of allied nations had built or repaired tens of thousands of kilometers of roads.[12] So while it is fair to note that the areas under the most Taliban pressure received the least aid, there were significant accomplishments generally. Five million refugees have returned, school enrollment has increased sixfold from Taliban days, and 35 percent of the students are female. For its part, the Taliban had burned or bombed over 1,000 schools in the 2007–2009 period. USAID alone, to the end of 2008, spent over $7 billion helping the Afghan people. It had the following accomplishments:

- 715 km of the Kabul to Kandahar to Herat Highway reconstructed
- 1,700 km of paved and 1,100 km of gravel roads completed
- 670 clinics or health facilities constructed or refurbished

- 10,600 health workers trained including doctors, midwives, and nurses
- $6 million of pharmaceuticals distributed
- 670 schools constructed or refurbished
- 60 million textbooks printed and distributed nationwide in Dari and Pashto
- 65,000 teachers trained in modern teaching methods
- 494,000 hectares of land received improved irrigation
- 28,118 loans made to small businesses, 75 percent to women
- 28 million livestock vaccinated/treated
- over 500 PRT quick impact projects completed.[13]

In all, the coalition did well in the first few years, but not well enough. Despite significant economic gains, poverty remained widespread and the insurgents did their best to disrupt the progress and interfere with aid workers. The level of international aid was not enough to stem the tide of an insurgency designed in part to frustrate it. Afghanistan had encountered the eternal truism of insurgency that Galula noted in the 1960s: Order is the government's goal; disorder is the insurgent's goal.

> *Moreover, disorder—the normal state of nature—is cheap to create and very costly to prevent. The insurgent blows up a bridge, so every bridge has to be guarded; he throws a grenade into a movie theater, so every person entering a public place has to be searched. . . . Because the counterinsurgent cannot escape the responsibility for maintaining order, the ratio of expenses between*

him and the insurgent is high. It may be ten or twenty to one, or higher.[14]

What Went Wrong in Afghanistan?

From 2002 to 2005, the Taliban rebuilt its cadres with drug money, "charity" from donors in the Gulf states, and help from al Qaeda. Their sanctuaries in Pakistan enabled them to rearm, refit, and retrain. By 2005, the Quetta Shura Taliban, led by Mullah Omar; the Hezb-i-Islami Gulbuddin, led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar; and the Haqqani Network, lead by Jalaluddin Haqqani and his son, Sirajuddin, were all working together to subvert the Karzai regime and wear down the coalition. All three groups swear at least nominal allegiance to Mullah Omar and coordinate major plans, but they are distinct operational entities with their own territories of interest in Afghanistan as well as fundraising mechanisms. Mullah Omar is also revered by the Pakistani Taliban, who have opposed Pakistan's government after 2006. In 2005, the Afghan government's lack of capacity and the allies' "light footprint" allowed many districts and a few provinces to fall under the quiet "shadow" control of the Taliban. In fact, some provinces, such as poppy-rich Helmand, had very little government or coalition presence before 2006.

In 2005, the Taliban began a nationwide offensive to spread its influence. From 2004 to 2009, there was a ninefold increase in security incidents nationwide, and a fortyfold increase in suicide bombing. Conflict spread to most of the 34 provinces, but 71 percent of the security incidents in 2010 took place in only 10 percent of the nearly 400 districts nationwide.[15] The war in Afghanistan today is still primarily a war over control of Pashtun areas in the eastern and southern portion of the country, but Taliban subversion and terrorism have become important factors

in many provinces. Efforts to combat narcotics growth and production generally failed or met with only temporary success. Corruption inside Afghanistan as well as Taliban revenue increased accordingly.

With lessons learned through al Qaeda in Iraq, the use of Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) became the tactic of choice of the Taliban. IED strikes went from 300 in 2004 to more than 4,000 in 2009. By the summer of 2010, more than half of all U.S. fatalities in Afghanistan were coming from IEDs.[16] Suicide bombers, almost unknown before 2004, became commonplace.

By 2009, there were Taliban shadow governments in nearly all provinces, although many had little real influence and not all of them lived in the designated provinces.[17] Even in areas dominated by the government or government-friendly tribes, Taliban subversion or terror tactics have become potent facts of life.

Beginning in 2005, the Taliban added more sophisticated information operations and local subversion to their standard terrorist tactics. The "night letters" of the Soviet-Afghan war era—a way to warn or intimidate the population—made a comeback. Among examples published by ISAF in August 2010, the first threatens students, teachers, and parents:

> *Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Maulawi Jalaludeen Haqani: This warning goes to all students, teachers, and personnel of Mohammad Sedeque Rohi High School. This high school has violated Mujahidin's established standards for education. Since the high school has taken a negative stand against Mujahidin, it is Mujahidin's final resolution to burn the high school to the ground or destroy it with a suicide attack, should any negative propaganda or information regarding Mujahidin be discussed in the future at the school.*

The next night letter, written over a drawing of a large knife, warns those who work for Americans:

> *Afghanistan Islamic Emirate, Kandahar province: We Mujahidin received information that you and your son are working for Americans. You cannot hide from Mujahidin, we will find you. If you and your son do not stop working for Americans then we will cut you and your son's heads with the knife that you see in this letter. Anybody who is working with the American will be punished with the knife that you see in this letter.*

The next letter threatens children for fraternizing with coalition soldiers:

> *Attention to all dear brothers: If the infidels come to your villages or to your mosques, please stop your youngsters from working for them and don't let them walk with the infidels. If anybody in your family is killed by a mine or anything else, then you will be the one responsible, not us.*[18]

Sadly, in addition to subversion, terror tactics remained standard operating procedure for the Taliban. In October 2008, for example, "the Taliban stopped a bus in the town of Maiwand, forcibly removed 50 passengers, and beheaded 30 of them."[19] A UN study in 2010 noted that:

> *The human cost of the armed conflict in Afghanistan is escalating in 2010. In the first six months of the year civilian casualties—including deaths and injuries of civilians—increased by 31 per cent over the same period in 2009. Three quarters of all civilian*

casualties were linked to Anti-Government Elements (AGEs), an increase of 53 per cent from 2009. At the same time, civilian casualties attributed to Pro-Government Forces (PGF) decreased by 30 per cent compared to the first half of 2009.[20]

While the population appreciates coalition restraint, the terror tactics of the Taliban have kept many Pashtuns on the fence.

Explaining the Lack of Progress

How did the war in Afghanistan degenerate from a quiet front in the war on terrorism to a hyperactive one? First, in the early years, there was little progress in building Afghan capacity for governance, security, or economic development. There was so little Afghan government and administrative capacity that much economic and security assistance bypassed the central government. Nations and international organizations found it more convenient to work through NGOs and contractors. In later years, these habits continued and corruption among Afghan government officials increased. Over the years, the government in turn lost key ministers such as Ashraf Ghani (finance), Abdullah Abdullah (foreign affairs), and Ali Jalali, an early minister of the interior. After the departure of Ambassador Khalilzad in 2005, Karzai lost his closest confidant on the American side. Subsequent Ambassadors—Ronald Neumann, William Wood, and Karl Eikenberry—did fine work but did not have the close relationship that existed between Karzai and Khalilzad.

The coalition widened, and NATO, which served as the overseer of the ISAF-assigned forces since 2003, took over the south and later the east in 2006.[21] Some Afghans and Pakistanis saw these efforts as a sign

of a weakening American commitment to the long war, despite the fact that over time, more and more U.S. forces were assigned to ISAF, which came to be commanded by an American general.

There was also much government corruption, often tied to police operations or the drug trade. Karzai took the lead in dealing with the so-called warlords, the regional strongmen. Many of them ended up in the government. Others continued their viral existence in the provinces, often using their local power and cunning to take money from reconstruction projects and even U.S. security contracts. Money laundering through Kabul International Airport became well developed. Pallets of convertible currencies were moved to the United Arab Emirates by individuals, corporations, and Afghan government officials.[22] President Karzai's brothers and immediate subordinates have also become the subject of corruption investigations.

Second, coalition arms, aid, trainers, and advisors ended up being too little, too slow, and too inefficient. The U.S. "light footprint" strategy in 2002–2004 was inadequate to the task and to the capacity of the threat. U.S. and allied combat troops fared well, but the coalition was unsuccessful in building the capacity of the Afghan security forces, especially the police. Responsibility for police training bounced from Germany to the State Department to the U.S. Department of Defense. In early 2010, parts of that effort were still in transition, and Army and police trainer/advisors remained in short supply. Coalition operations in Afghanistan have also become a nightmare of "contractorization," with more Western-sponsored contractors—many armed—than soldiers in country. This in part reflects the limitations of relatively small volunteer forces and the ravages of protracted conflict. The police were an especially weak link in the security chain, and the Taliban has made attacking the ANP a prior-

ity. From 2007 to 2009, Afghan security personnel killed in action (3,046) outnumbered U.S. and allied dead (nearly 800) by more than 3 to 1.[23] More than two out of three of the Afghan personnel killed were police.

In all, from 2004 to 2009, there were insufficient coalition forces or Afghan National Security Forces to "clear, hold, and build," and nowhere near enough capacity to "transfer" responsibility to Afghan forces. The Taliban had a wide pool of unemployed tribesmen and former militia fighters to recruit from, as well as greater latitude in picking targets. By 2009, the war of the flea spread from its home base in the Pashtun areas in the south and east to the entire nation.

In the early years, coalition offensive military efforts often resembled the game of "Whack-a-mole," where a sweep would go after the Taliban, who would go into hiding until the coalition forces left. Taliban penetration of many areas deepened. Subversion, terrorism, and night letters from the local Taliban ruled many apparently safe districts by night. In areas with scant Pashtun populations, the Taliban also used motorcycle squads and IEDs for controlling the population. Since 2006, Taliban judges have administered sharia-based judgments, trumping Karzai's slow and sometimes corrupt civil courts. The Afghan people have had little love for the Taliban, but insecurity has made them hesitant to act against them.

It is not true that initial U.S. operations in Iraq (2003–2004) stripped Afghanistan of what it needed to fight the Taliban. But 2004 was the last "good" year for Afghan security. While some Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance assets and Special Forces units had been removed from Afghanistan, most of the assets needed to continue the operation were wisely "fenced" by Pentagon and USCENTCOM planners before the invasion of Iraq.[24] It is fair to say, however, that

post-2005, as the situation in Afghanistan began to decline, the greater scope and intensity of problems in Iraq prevented reinforcements or additional funds from being sent to Afghanistan. Another policy fault plagued U.S. war efforts: while U.S. fortunes declined in two wars, U.S. Department of Defense leadership refused to expand the end strength of the U.S. Armed Forces until 2006. For a short time, the Pentagon slightly reduced U.S. troops in Afghanistan when NATO took over command and control of the mission that year.

One example of insufficient support to our efforts from Washington could be classified as typical. Noting the increase in enemy activity and the paucity of foreign assistance programs, Ambassador Ronald E. Neumann in October 2005 requested an additional $601 million for roads, power, agriculture, counternarcotics, and PRT support. The State Department reduced the figure to $400 million, but in the end, not including debt relief, national decisionmakers disallowed all but $32 million of the $601 million the Embassy requested. Neumann concluded, "I believed then and suspect now that the decision was driven by the desire to avoid too large a budget; Iraq and hurricane relief won and we lost." Secretary Rice could not do anything about it. As the Taliban offensive intensified, no other nation or institution made up for the shortfall. Human and fiscal reinforcement came in 2007, but some felt that it was too little too late.[25]

The regional powers—Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, India, Russia, and China—did little to help. Each had its own interests and timetables. Iran and Pakistan were part of the problem, and the other four were unable to further a solution. Pakistan was wary of American staying power and hedged its bets, allowing the Afghan Taliban to operate from its territory with minimal interference. Iran was no friend of the Taliban, and

it worked (often with bags of cash) to further its interests with authorities in Kabul and in the western part of Afghanistan in an effort to improve trade and border control. Tehran, however, has also erratically aided the Taliban to ensure an American quagmire, if not outright defeat. India gave over $1 billion in aid and was helpful on the commercial end. It worked hard to earn contracts in Afghanistan and forged a logistical alliance with Iran to work around Pakistan's geographic advantages. Saudi Arabia tried to use its good offices to end the war but was frustrated by the Afghan Taliban's refusal to break relations with al Qaeda, a sworn enemy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Russia and China exploited commercial contacts, and Russia slowly began to improve counternarcotics cooperation with the coalition. In later years, Russia participated with other regional nations in forming a northern logistics route. China is poised today to help Afghanistan develop its mineral deposits. More is said on the regional powers in the final chapter.

In all, by 2009, the regional powers were not the primary cause of the war in Afghanistan, but their policies have not worked toward a solution. Pakistan is particularly noteworthy. While the U.S. policy—correct in my view—has been one of patient engagement to wean Islamabad from its dysfunctional ways, analysts from other countries could be openly bitter. One Canadian historian who served in Afghanistan wrote that Pakistan was behind the external support to the insurgents in southern Afghanistan: "To pretend that Pakistan is anything but a failed state equipped with nuclear weapons, and a country with a 50-year history of exporting low-intensity warfare as a strategy, ignores the 800-pound gorilla in the room."[26]

By the end of the Bush administration, security was down, as was Afghan optimism about the future. Afghan confidence in the United States

and its allies was halved in 2008. Many Afghans believed the Taliban had grown stronger every year since 2005, and incentives for fence-sitting increased along with fear and disgust at government corruption. Polls in Afghanistan rebounded in 2009 with a new U.S. administration and the prospect for elections in Afghanistan. Karzai's popularity plummeted in the West after widespread fraud in the 2010 presidential elections. The Obama administration clearly needed a new strategy.[27]

Events in Afghanistan were trying, but the nearly desperate situation in Iraq up to mid-2007 kept U.S. leaders from focusing on them. It was not until the obvious success of the surge in Iraq that U.S. decisionmakers—late in the Bush administration—were able to turn their attention to the increasingly dire situation in Afghanistan. With the advent of the Obama administration and improvements in Iraq, Afghanistan became the top priority in the war on terrorism. By the summer of 2010, there were more than two U.S. Soldiers in Afghanistan for every one in Iraq. In fall 2010, there were nearly as many non-Afghan allied soldiers in the country (40,000) as there were American Soldiers still in Iraq. The policy that brought that about was also called the surge, despite some significant differences with its sibling in Iraq.