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Editorial

AFGHANISTAN: MIRAGE OF THE GOOD WAR

RARELY HAS THERE been such an enthusiastic display of international unity as that which greeted the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. Support for the war was universal in the chanceries of the West, even before its aims and parameters had been declared. NATO governments rushed to assert themselves ‘all for one’. Blair jettied round the world, proselytizing the ‘doctrine of the international community’ and the opportunities for peace-keeping and nation-building in the Hindu Kush. Putin welcomed the extension of American bases along Russia’s southern borders. Every mainstream Western party endorsed the war; every media network—with BBC World and CNN in the lead—became its megaphone. For the German Greens, as for Laura Bush and Cherie Blair, it was a war for the liberation of the women of Afghanistan.¹ For the White House, a fight for civilization. For Iran, the impending defeat of the Wahhabi enemy.

Three years later, as the chaos in Iraq deepened, Afghanistan became the ‘good war’ by comparison. It had been legitimized by the UN—even if the resolution was not passed until after the bombs had finished falling—and backed by NATO. If tactical differences had sharpened over Iraq, they could be resolved in Afghanistan. First Zapatero, then Prodi, then Rudd, compensated for pulling troops out of Iraq by dispatching them to Kabul.² France and Germany could extol their peace-keeping or civilizing roles there. As suicide bombings increased in Baghdad, Afghanistan was now—for American Democrats keen to prove their

‘security’ credentials—the ‘real front’ of the war on terror, supported by every US presidential candidate in the run-up to the 2008 elections, with Senator Obama pressuring the White House to violate Pakistani sovereignty whenever necessary. With varying degrees of firmness, the occupation of Afghanistan was also supported by China, Iran and Russia; though in the case of the latter, there was always a strong element of *Schadenfreude*. Soviet veterans of the Afghan war were amazed to see their mistakes now being repeated by the United States in a war even more inhumane than its predecessor.

Meanwhile, the number of Afghan civilians killed has exceeded many tens of times over the 2,746 who died in Manhattan. Unemployment is around 60 per cent and maternal, infant and child mortality levels are now among the highest in the world. Opium harvests have soared, and the ‘Neo-Taliban’ is growing stronger year by year. By common consent, Karzai’s government does not even control its own capital, let alone provide an example of ‘good governance’. Reconstruction funds vanish into cronies’ pockets or go to pay short-contract Western consultants. Police are predators rather than protectors. The social crisis is deepening. Increasingly, Western commentators have evoked the spectre of failure—usually in order to spur *encore un effort*. A *Guardian* leader summarizes: ‘Defeat looks possible, with all the terrible consequences that will bring.’³

Two principal arguments, often overlapping, are put forward as to ‘what went wrong’ in Afghanistan. For liberal imperialists, the answer can

¹ In fact, the only period in Afghan history where women were granted equal rights and educated was from 1979–89, the decade it was ruled by the PDPA, backed by Soviet troops. Repressive in many ways, on the health and education fronts real progress was achieved, as in Iraq under Saddam. Hence the nostalgia for the past amongst poorer sections of society in both countries.

² Visiting Madrid after Zapatero’s election triumph of March 2008, I was informed by a senior government official that they had considered a total withdrawal from Afghanistan a few months before the polls but had been outmanoeuvred by the US promising Spain that the head of its military would be proposed for commander of the NATO forces, and a withdrawal from Kabul would disrupt this possibility. Spain drew back, only to discover it had been tricked.

³ ‘Failing State’, *Guardian*, 1 February 2008; see also ‘The Good War, Still to Be Won’ and ‘Gates, Truth and Afghanistan’, *New York Times*, 20 August 2007 and 12 February 2008; ‘Must they be wars without end?’, *Economist*, 13 December 2007; International Crisis Group, ‘Combating Afghanistan’s Insurgency’, 2 November 2006.

be summarized in two words: ‘not enough’. The invasion organized by Bush, Cheney and Rumsfeld was done on the cheap. The ‘light footprint’ demanded by the Pentagon meant that there were too few troops on the ground in 2001–02. Financial commitment to ‘state-building’ was insufficient. Though it may now be too late, the answer is to pour in more troops, more money—‘multiple billions’ over ‘multiple years’, according to the US Ambassador in Kabul.⁴ The second answer—advanced by Karzai and the White House, but propagated by the Western media generally—can be summed up in one word: Pakistan. Neither of these arguments holds water.

Political failures

True, there was a sense of relief in Kabul when the Taliban’s Wahhabite Emirate was overthrown. Though rape and heroin production had been curtailed under their rule, warlords kept at bay and order largely restored in a country that had been racked by foreign and civil wars since 1979, the end result had been a ruthless social dictatorship with a level of control over the everyday lives of ordinary people that made the clerical regime in Iran appear an island of enlightenment. The Taliban government fell without a serious struggle. Islamabad, officially committed to the US cause, forbade any frontal confrontation.⁵ Some Taliban zealots crossed the border into Pakistan, while a more independent faction loyal to Mullah Omar decamped to the mountains to fight another day. Kabul was undefended; the BBC war correspondent entered the capital before the Northern Alliance. What many Afghans now expected from a successor government was a similar level of order, minus the repression and social restrictions, and a freeing of the country’s spirit. What they were instead presented with was a melancholy spectacle that blasted all their hopes.

The problem was not lack of funds but the Western state-building project itself, by its nature an exogenous process—aiming to construct an army able to suppress its own population but incapable of defending

⁴ *New York Times*, 5 November 2006.

⁵ Pakistan’s key role in securing this ‘victory’ was underplayed in the Western media at the time. The public was told that it was elite Special Forces units and CIA ‘specialists’ that had liberated Afghanistan; having triumphed here they could now be sent on to Iraq.

the nation from outside powers; a civil administration with no control over planning or social infrastructure, which are in the hands of Western NGOs; and a government whose foreign policy marches in step with Washington's. It bore no relation to the realities on the ground. After the fall of the Taliban government, four major armed groups re-emerged as strong regional players. In the gas-rich and more industrialized north, bordering the Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, the Uzbek warlord Rashid Dostum was in charge with his capital in Mazar-i-Sharif. Allied first to the Communists, later the Taliban and most recently NATO, General Dostum had demonstrated his latest loyalty by massacring 2–3,000 Taliban and Arab prisoners under the approving gaze of US intelligence personnel in December 2001.

Not too far from Dostum, in the mountainous north-east of the country, a region rich in emeralds, lapis lazuli and opium, the late Ahmed Shah Masoud had built a fighting organization of Tajiks, who regularly ambushed troops on the Salang Highway that linked Kabul to Tashkent during the Soviet occupation. Masoud had been the leader of the armed wing of Burhanuddin Rabbani's *Jamaat-i-Islami*, which operated in tandem with an allied Islamist leader, Abd al-Rabb Sayyaf (both men were lecturers in *sharia* at the law faculty of Kabul University in 1973, where these movements were incubated). Until 1993 they were funded by Saudi Arabia, after which the latter gradually shifted its support to the Taliban. Masoud maintained a semi-independence during the Taliban period, up to his death on 9 September 2001.⁶ Masoud's supporters are currently in the government, but are not considered one hundred per cent reliable as far as NATO is concerned.

To the west, sheltered by neighbouring Iran, lies the ancient city of Herat, once a centre of learning and culture where poets, artists and scholars flourished. Among the important works illustrated here over the course of three centuries was a 15th-century version of the classic *Miraj-nameh*, an early medieval account of the Prophet's ascent to heaven from the Dome

⁶ Masoud had been a favourite pin-up in Paris during the Soviet–Afghan war, usually portrayed as a ruggedly romantic, anti-Communist Che Guevara. His membership of Rabbani's Islamist group and reactionary views on most social issues were barely mentioned. But if he had presented an image of incorruptible masculinity to his supporters in the West, it was not the same at home. Rape and the heroin trade were not uncommon in areas under his control.



of the Rock and the punishments he observed as he passed through hell.⁷ In modern Herat, the Shia warlord Ismail Khan holds sway. A former army captain inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Ismail achieved instant fame by leading a garrison revolt against the pro-Moscow regime in 1979. Backed by Teheran he built up a strong force that united all the Shia groups and were to trouble the Russians throughout their stay. Tens of thousands of refugees from this region (where a Persian dialect is the spoken language) were given work, shelter and training in Iran. From 1992–95, the province was run on authoritarian lines. It was a harsh regime: Ismail Khan's half-witted effrontery soon began to alienate his allies, while his high-tax and forced conscription policies angered peasant families. By the time the Taliban took power in Kabul in 1996, support had already drained away from the warlord. Herat fell without a struggle,

⁷ The stunning illustrations were exquisitely calligraphed by Malik Bakshi in the Uighur script. There are 61 paintings in all, created with great love for the Prophet of Islam. He is depicted with Central Asian features and seen flying to heaven on a magical steed with a woman's head. There are also illustrations of a meeting with Gabriel and Adam, a sighting of houris at the gates of Paradise, and of winebibbers being punished in hell. European scholars have suggested that an early Latin translation of the poem may have been a source of inspiration for Dante.

and Ismail was imprisoned by the Taliban, only escaping in March 2000. His supporters meanwhile crossed the border to Iran where they bided their time, to return in October 2001 under NATO cover.

The south was another story again. The Pashtun villages bore the brunt of the fighting during the 1980s and 90s.⁸ Rapid population growth, coupled with the disruptions of war and the resulting loss of livestock, hastened the collapse of the subsistence economy. In many districts this was replaced by poppy cultivation and the rule of local bandits and strongmen. By the early 1990s, three militant Sunni groups had acquired dominance in the region: the Taliban, the group led by Ahmed Shah Masoud from the Panjsher province, and the followers of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, once Pakistan's favourite, who had been groomed by the Saudis as the new leader. The jihad was long over, and now the jihadis were at each other's throats, with control of the drug trade the major stake in a brutal power struggle. Under Benazir Bhutto's second premiership, Pakistan's military backing for the Taliban proved decisive. But the overthrow of the Mullah Omar government in the winter of 2001 saw the re-emergence of many of the local gangsters whose predations it had partly checked.

Anointment of Karzai

Washington assigned the task of assembling a new government to Zalmay Khalilzad, its Afghan-American pro-consul in Kabul. The capital was occupied by competing militias, united only by opposition to the toppled Taliban, and their representatives had to be accommodated on every level. The Northern Alliance candidate for president, Abdul Haq of Jalalabad, had conveniently been captured and executed in October 2001 by the Taliban when he entered the country with a small group from Pakistan. (His supporters alleged betrayal by the CIA and the ISI, who were unhappy about his links to Russia and Iran, and tipped off Mullah Omar.) Another obvious anti-Taliban candidate was Ahmed Shah Masoud; but he had

⁸ Afghanistan's ethnography has generated a highly politicized statistical debate. The 6-year survey carried out by a Norwegian foundation is probably the most accurate. This suggests that Pashtuns make up an estimated 63 per cent of the population, along with the mainly Persian-speaking Tajiks (12 per cent), Uzbeks (9 per cent) and the mainly Shia Hazaras (6 per cent): WAK Foundation, Norway 1999. The CIA Factbook, by contrast, gives 42, 27, 9 and 9 per cent respectively. The tiny non-Muslim minority of Hindus and Sikhs, mainly shopkeepers and traders in Kabul, were displaced by the Taliban; some were killed, and thousands fled to India.

also been killed—by a suicide bomber of unknown provenance—two days before 9.11. Masoud would no doubt have been the EU choice for Afghan president, had he lived; the French government issued a postage stamp with his portrait, and Kabul airport bears his name. Whether he would have proved as reliable a client as Khalilzad's transplanted protégé, Hamid Karzai, must now remain an open question.

Aware that the US could not run the country without the Northern Alliance and its backers in Teheran and Moscow, Khalilzad toned down the emancipatory rhetoric and concentrated on the serious business of occupation. The coalition he constructed resembled a blind octopus, with mainly Tajik limbs and Karzai as its unseeing eye. The Afghan president comes from the Durrani tribe of Pashtuns from Kandahar. His father had served in a junior capacity in Zahir Shah's government. Young Karzai backed the mujaheddin against Russia and later supported the Taliban, though he turned down their offer to become Afghanistan's Ambassador to the UN, preferring to relocate and work for UNOCAL. Here he backed up Khalilzad, who was then representing CentGas in their bid to construct a pipeline that would take gas from Turkmenistan across Afghanistan to Pakistan and India.⁹

After his appointment as interim president, the Saudi daily *Al-Watan* published a revealing profile of Karzai, stating that he had been a CIA pawn since the 80s, with his status on the Afghan chessboard enhanced every few years:

Since then, Karzai's ties with the Americans have not been interrupted. At the same time, he established ties with the British and other European and

⁹ The CentGas consortium, incorporated in 1997, included UNOCAL, Gazprom, Hyundai and oil companies from Saudi Arabia, Japan and Pakistan. In late 1997 a Taliban delegation received full honours when they visited UNOCAL HQ, hoping to sign the £2bn pipeline contract. According to the *Sunday Telegraph* ('Oil Barons Court Taliban in Texas', 14 December 1997): 'the Islamic warriors appear to have been persuaded to close the deal, not through delicate negotiation but by old-fashioned Texan hospitality. Dressed in traditional *shalwar kameez*, Afghan waistcoats and loose, black turbans, the high-ranking delegation was given VIP treatment during the four-day stay.' The project was suspended in 1998, as the Taliban were split on whom to award the pipeline project to: Mullah Rabbani preferred the offer from the Argentine company Bidas, while Mullah Omar was strongly in favour of the American-led deal. But US-Taliban contacts continued till mid-2001 both in Islamabad and New York, where the Taliban maintained a 'diplomatic office' headed by Abdul Hakim Mojahed.

international sides, especially after he became deputy foreign minister in 1992 in the wake of the Afghan mujaheddin's assumption of power and the overthrow of the pro-Moscow Najibullah regime. Karzai found no contradiction between his ties with the Americans and his support for the Taliban movement as of 1994, when the Americans had—secretly and through the Pakistanis—supported the Taliban's assumption of power to put an end to the civil war and the actual partition of Afghanistan due to the failure of Burhanuddin Rabbani's experience in ruling the country.¹⁰

Karzai was duly installed in December 2001, but intimacy with us intelligence networks failed to translate into authority or legitimacy at home. Karzai harboured no illusions about his popularity in the country. He knew his biological and political life was heavily dependent on the occupation and demanded a bodyguard of us Marines or American mercenaries, rather than a security detail from his own ethnic Pashtun base.¹¹ There were at least three coup attempts against him in 2002–03 by his Northern Alliance allies; these were fought off by the ISAF, which was largely tied down in assuring Karzai's security—while also providing a vivid illustration of where his support lay.¹² A quick-fix presidential contest organized at great expense by Western PR firms in October 2004—just in time for the us elections—failed to bolster support for the puppet president inside the country. Karzai's habit of parachuting his relatives and protégés into provincial governor or police chief jobs has driven many local communities into alliance with the Taliban, as the main anti-government force. In Zabul, Helmand and elsewhere, all the insurgents had to do was 'approach the victims of the pro-Karzai strongmen and promise them protection and support. Attempts by local elders to seek protection in Kabul routinely ended nowhere, as the wrongdoers enjoyed either direct US support or Karzai's sympathy.'¹³

Nor is it any secret that Karzai's younger brother, Ahmad Wali Karzai, has now become one of the richest drug barons in the country. At a meeting with Pakistan's president in 2005, when Karzai was bleating

¹⁰ BBC Monitoring Service, 15 December 2001.

¹¹ The late Benazir Bhutto made the same request for American protection on her return to Pakistan, but in her case it was vetoed by Islamabad.

¹² Barry McCaffrey, 'Trip to Afghanistan and Pakistan', US Military Academy Memorandum, West Point, NY 2006, p. 8.

¹³ Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop: the Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan*, London 2007, p. 60. The corruption and brutality of the newly established Afghan National Police is also widely credited with turning the population against the Karzai government.

about Pakistan's inability to stop cross-border smuggling, Musharraf suggested that perhaps Karzai should set an example by bringing his sibling under control. (The hatred for each other of these two close allies of Washington is well known in the region.)

New inequalities

Also feeding the resentment is the behaviour of a new elite clustered around Karzai and the occupying forces, which has specialized in creaming off foreign aid to create its own criminal networks of graft and patronage. The corruptions of this layer grow each month like an untreated tumour. Western funds are siphoned off to build fancy homes for the native enforcers. Housing scandals erupted as early as 2002, when cabinet ministers awarded themselves and favoured cronies prime real estate in Kabul where land prices were rocketing, since the occupiers and their camp followers had to live in the style to which they were accustomed. Karzai's colleagues, protected by ISAF troops, built their large villas in full view of the mud-brick hovels of the poor. The burgeoning slum settlements of Kabul, where the population has now swollen to an estimated 3 million, are a measure of the social crisis that has engulfed the country.

The ancient city has suffered cruelly over the past thirty years. Jade Maiwand, the modernized 'Oxford Street' cut through the centre in the 1970s, was reduced to rubble during the warfare of 1992–96. An American-Afghan architect describes how Kabul has been relentlessly transformed:

from a modern capital, to the military and political headquarters of an invading army, to the besieged seat of power of a puppet regime, to the front lines of factional conflict resulting in the destruction of two-thirds of its urban mass, to the testing fields of religious fanaticism which erased from the city the final layers of urban life, to the target of an international war on terrorism.¹⁴

Yet never have such gaping inequalities featured on this scale before. Little of the supposed \$19 billion 'aid and reconstruction' money has reached the majority of Afghans. The mains electricity supply is worse now than five years ago, and while the rich can use private generators to power their air conditioners, hot-water heaters, computers and satellite

¹⁴ Ajmal Maiwandi, 'Re-Doing Kabul', presented at LSE, 11 July 2002.

TVs, average Kabulis 'suffered a summer without fans and face a winter without heaters.'¹⁵ As a result, hundreds of shelterless Afghans are literally freezing to death each winter.

Then there are the NGOs who descended on the country like locusts after the occupation. As one observer reports:

A reputed 10,000 NGO staff have turned Kabul into the Klondike during the gold rush, building office blocks, driving up rents, cruising about in armoured jeeps and spending stupefying sums of other people's money, essentially on themselves. They take orders only from some distant agency, but then the same goes for the American army, NATO, the UN, the EU and the supposedly sovereign Afghan government.¹⁶

Even supporters of the occupation have lost patience with these bodies, and some of the most successful candidates in the 2005 National Assembly elections made an attack on them a centre-piece of their campaigns. Worse, according to one US specialist, 'their well-funded activities highlighted the poverty and ineffectiveness of the civil administration and discredited its local representatives in the eyes of the local populace.'¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, NGO employees began to be targeted by the insurgents, including in the north, and had to hire mercenary protection.

In sum: even in the estimate of the West's own specialists and institutions, 'nation-building' in Afghanistan has been flawed in its very conception. It has so far produced a puppet president dependent for his survival on foreign mercenaries, a corrupt and abusive police force, a 'non-functioning' judiciary, a thriving criminal layer and a deepening social and economic crisis. It beggars belief to argue that 'more of this' will be the answer to Afghanistan's problems.

An Afghan surge?

The argument that more NATO troops are the solution is equally unsustainable. All the evidence suggests that the brutality of the occupying forces has been one of the main sources of recruits for the Taliban.

¹⁵ Barnett Rubin, 'Saving Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, January–February 2007.

¹⁶ Simon Jenkins, 'It takes inane optimism to see victory in Afghanistan', *Guardian*, 8 August 2007.

¹⁷ S. Frederick Starr, 'Sovereignty and Legitimacy in Afghan Nation-Building', in Fukuyama, ed., *Nation-Building Beyond Afghanistan and Iraq*, Baltimore 2006, p. 117.

American air power, lovingly referred to as ‘Big Daddy’ by frightened US soldiers on unwelcome terrain, is far from paternal when it comes to targeting Pashtun villages. There is widespread fury among Afghans at the number of civilian casualties, many of them children. There have been numerous incidents of rape and rough treatment of women by ISAF soldiers, as well as indiscriminate bombing of villages and house-to-house search-and-arrest missions. The behaviour of the foreign mercenaries backing up the NATO forces is just as bad. Even sympathetic observers admit that ‘their alcohol consumption and patronage of a growing number of brothels in Kabul . . . is arousing public anger and resentment.’¹⁸ To this could be added the deaths by torture at the US-run Bagram prison and the resuscitation of a Soviet-era security law under which detainees are being sentenced to 20-year jail terms on the basis of summary allegations by US military authorities. All this creates a thirst for dignity that can only be assuaged by genuine independence.

Talk of ‘victory’ sounds increasingly hollow to Afghan ears. Many who detest the Taliban are so angered by the failures of NATO and the behaviour of its troops that they are pleased there is some opposition. What was initially viewed by some locals as a necessary police action against al-Qaeda following the 9.11 attacks is now perceived by a growing majority in the region as a fully fledged imperial occupation. Successive recent reports have suggested that the unpopularity of the government and the ‘disrespectful’ behaviour of the occupying troops have had the effect of creating nostalgia for the time when the Taliban were in power. The repression leaves people with no option but to back those trying to resist, especially in a part of the world where the culture of revenge is strong. When a whole community feels threatened it reinforces solidarity, regardless of the character or weakness of those who fight back. This does not just apply to the countryside. The mass protests in Kabul, when civilians were killed by an American military vehicle, signalled the obvious targets:

Rioters chanted slogans against the United States and President Karzai and attacked the Parliament building, the offices of media outlets and non-governmental organizations, diplomatic residences, brothels, and hotels and restaurants that purportedly served alcohol. The police, many of whom disappeared, proved incompetent, and the vulnerability of the government to mass violence became clear.¹⁹

¹⁸ Barnett Rubin, ‘Proposals for Improved Stability in Afghanistan’, in Ivo Daalder et al, eds, *Crescent of Crisis: US–European Strategy for the Greater Middle East*, Washington, DC 2006, p. 149.

¹⁹ Rubin, ‘Saving Afghanistan’.

As the British and Russians discovered to their cost in the preceding two centuries, Afghans do not like being occupied. If a second-generation Taliban is now growing and creating new alliances it is not because its sectarian religious practices have become popular, but because it is the only available umbrella for national liberation. Initially, the middle-cadre Taliban who fled across the border in November 2001 and started low-level guerrilla activity the following year attracted only a trickle of new recruits from madrasas and refugee camps. From 2004 onwards, increasing numbers of young Waziris were radicalized by Pakistani military and police incursions in the tribal areas, as well as devastating attacks on villages by unmanned us 'drones'. At the same time, the movement was starting to win active support from village mullahs in Zabul, Helmand, Ghazni, Paktika and Kandahar provinces, and then in the towns. By 2006 there were reports of Kabul mullahs who had previously supported Karzai's allies but were now railing against the foreigners and the government; calls for jihad against the occupiers were heard in the north-east border provinces of Takhar and Badakhshan.

The largest pool for new Taliban recruits, according to a well-informed recent estimate, has been 'communities antagonized by the local authorities and security forces'. In Kandahar, Helmand and Uruzgan, Karzai's cronies—district and provincial governors, security bosses, police chiefs—are quite prepared to tip off us troops against their local rivals, as well as subjecting the latter to harassment and extortion. In these circumstances, the Taliban are the only available defence. (According to the same report, the Taliban themselves have claimed that families driven into refugee camps by indiscriminate US airpower attacks on their villages have been their major source of recruits.) By 2006 the movement was winning the support of traders and businessmen in Kandahar, and led a mini 'Tet offensive' there that year. One reason suggested for their increasing support in towns is that the new-model Taliban have relaxed their religious strictures, for males at least—no longer demanding beards or banning music—and improved their propaganda: producing cassette tapes and CDs of popular singers, and DVDs of US and Israeli atrocities in Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine.²⁰

The re-emergence of the Taliban cannot therefore simply be blamed on Islamabad's failure to police the border, or cut 'command and control' links, as the Americans claim. While the ISI played a crucial role

²⁰ Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov and Laptop*, pp. 42, 69.

in bringing the Taliban to power in 1996 and in the retreat of 2001, they no longer have the same degree of control over a more diffuse and widespread movement, for which the occupation itself has been the main recruiting sergeant. It is a traditional colonial ploy to blame 'outsiders' for internal problems: Karzai specializes in this approach. If anything, the destabilization functions in the other direction: the war in Afghanistan has created a critical situation in two Pakistani frontier provinces, and the use of the Pakistan army by Centcom has resulted in suicide terrorism in Lahore, where the Federal Investigation Agency and the Naval War College have been targeted by supporters of the Afghan insurgents. The Pashtun majority in Afghanistan has always had close links to its fellow Pashtuns in Pakistan. The present border was an imposition by the British Empire, but it has always remained porous. It is virtually impossible to build a Texan fence or an Israeli wall across the mountainous and largely unmarked 1,500-mile frontier that separates the two countries.

Older models

The current occupation of Afghanistan naturally recalls colonial operations in the region, not just to Afghans but to some Western myth-makers—usually British, but with a few Subcontinental mimics—who try to draw lessons from the older model; the implication being that the British were 'good imperialists' who have a great deal to teach the brutish, impatient Americans. The British administrators were, for the most part, racist to the core, and their self-proclaimed 'competence' involved the efficient imposition of social apartheid in every colony they controlled. They could be equally brutal in Africa, the Middle East and India. Though a promise of civilizational uplift was required as ideological justification, then as now, the facts of the colonial legacy speak for themselves. In 1947, the year the British left India, the overwhelming majority of midnight's children were illiterate, and 85 per cent of the economy was rural.²¹

²¹ 'Per capita income was about one-twentieth of the level then attained in developed countries . . . Illiteracy was a high 84 per cent and the majority (60 per cent) of children in the 6 to 11 age-group did not attend school; mass communicable diseases (malaria, smallpox and cholera) were widespread and, in the absence of a good public health service and sanitation, mortality rates (27 per 1,000) were very high.' Dharma Kumar and Meghnad Desai, eds, *Cambridge Economic History of India*, vol. II: c.1757–c.1970, Cambridge 1983, p. 23.

Not bad intentions or botched initiatives, but the imperial presence itself was the problem. Kipling is much quoted today by editorialists urging a bigger Western ‘footprint’ in Afghanistan, but even he was fully aware of the hatred felt by the Pashtuns for the British, and wrote as much in one of his last despatches from Peshawar in April 1885 to the *Civil and Military Gazette* in Lahore:

Pathans, Afridis, Logas, Kohistanis, Turcomans and a hundred other varieties of the turbulent Afghan race, are gathered in the vast human menagerie between the Edwardes Gate and the Ghor Khutri. As an Englishman passes, they will turn to scowl on him, and in many cases to spit fluently on the ground after he has passed. One burly, big-paunched ruffian, with shaven head and a neck creased and dimpled with rolls of fat, is specially zealous in this religious rite—contenting himself with no perfunctory performance, but with a whole-souled expectoration, that must be as refreshing to his comrades as it is disgusting to the European.

One reason among many for the Pashtuns’ historic resentment was the torching of the famous bazaar in Kabul, a triumph of Mughal architecture. Ali Mardan Khan, a renowned governor, architect and engineer, had built the *chahr-chatta* (four-sided) roofed and arcaded central market in the 17th century on the model of those in old Euro-Arabian Muslim cities—Cairo, Damascus, Baghdad, Palermo or Córdoba. It was regarded as unique in the region; nothing on the same scale was built in Lahore or Delhi. The bazaar was deliberately destroyed in 1842 by General Pollock’s ‘Army of Retribution’, remembered as amongst the worst killers, looters and marauders ever to arrive in Afghanistan, a contest in which competition remains strong. Defeated in a number of cities and forced to evacuate Kabul, the British punished its citizens by removing the market from the map. What will remain of Kabul when the current occupiers finally withdraw is yet to be seen, but its spreading mass of deeply impoverished squatter settlements suggest that it is set to be one of the major new capitals of the ‘planet of slums’.²²

The Western occupation of Afghanistan is now confronted with five seemingly intractable, interrelated problems. The systemic failures of its nation-building strategy, the corruption of its local agents, the growing alienation of large sectors of the population and the strengthening of armed resistance are all compounded by the distortions wrought by

²² Mike Davis, ‘Planet of Slums’, NLR 26, March–April 2004, p. 13.

the opium-heroin industry on the country's economy. According to UN estimates, narcotics account for 53 per cent of the country's gross domestic product, and the poppy fields continue to spread. Some 90 per cent of the world opium supply emanates from Afghanistan. Since 2003 the NATO mission has made no serious attempt to bring about a reduction in this lucrative trade. Karzai's own supporters would rapidly desert if their activities in this sphere were disrupted, and the amount of state help needed over many years to boost agriculture and cottage industries and reduce dependence on poppy farming would require an entirely different set of priorities. Only a surreal utopian could expect NATO countries, busy privatizing and deregulating their own economies, to embark upon full-scale national-development projects abroad.

NATO's goals

It need hardly be added that the bombardment and occupation of Afghanistan has been a disastrous—and predictable—failure in capturing the perpetrators of 9.11. This could only have been the result of effective police work; not of international war and military occupation. Everything that has happened in Afghanistan since 2001—not to mention Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon—has had the opposite effect, as the West's own intelligence reports have repeatedly confirmed. According to the official 9.11 Commission report, Mullah Omar's initial response to Washington's demands that Osama Bin Laden be handed over and al-Qaeda deprived of a safe haven was 'not negative'; he himself had opposed any al-Qaeda attack on US targets.²³ But while the Mullah was playing for time, the White House closed down negotiations. It required a swift war of revenge. Afghanistan had been denominated the first port of call in the 'global war on terror', with Iraq already the Administration's main target. The shock-and-awe six-week aerial onslaught that followed was merely a drumroll for the forthcoming intervention in Iraq, with no military rationale in Afghanistan. Predictably, it only gave al-Qaeda leaders the chance to vanish into the hills. To portray the invasion as a 'war of self-defence' for NATO makes a mockery of international law, which was perverted to twist a flukishly successful attack by a tiny, terrorist Arab groupuscule into an excuse for an open-ended American military thrust into the Middle East and Central Eurasia.

²³ *The 9.11 Commission Report*, New York 2004, pp. 333–4; 251–2.

Herein lie the reasons for the near-unanimity among Western opinion-makers that the occupation must not only continue but expand—‘many billions over many years’. They are to be sought not in the mountain fastnesses of Afghanistan, but in Washington and Brussels. As the *Economist* summarizes, ‘Defeat would be a body blow not only to the Afghans, but’—and more importantly, of course—‘to the NATO alliance’.²⁴ As ever, geopolitics prevails over Afghan interests in the calculus of the big powers. The basing agreement signed by the US with its appointee in Kabul in May 2005 gives the Pentagon the right to maintain a massive military presence in Afghanistan in perpetuity, potentially including nuclear missiles. That Washington is not seeking permanent bases in this fraught and inhospitable terrain simply for the sake of ‘democratization and good governance’ was made clear by NATO’s Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer at the Brookings Institution in February this year: a permanent NATO presence in a country that borders the ex-Soviet republics, China, Iran and Pakistan was too good to miss.²⁵

More strategically, Afghanistan has become a central theatre for reconstituting, and extending, the West’s power-political grip on the world order. It provides, first, an opportunity for the US to shrug off problems in persuading its allies to play a broader role in Iraq. As Obama and Clinton have stressed, America and its allies ‘have greater unity of purpose in Afghanistan. The ultimate outcome of NATO’s effort to stabilize Afghanistan and US leadership of that effort may well affect the cohesiveness of the alliance and Washington’s ability to shape NATO’s future.’²⁶ Beyond this, it is the rise of China that has prompted NATO strategists to propose a vastly expanded role for the Western military alliance. Once focused on the Euro-Atlantic area, a recent essay in *NATO Review* suggests, ‘in the 21st century NATO must become an alliance *founded* on the Euro-Atlantic area, designed to project systemic stability beyond its borders’:

The centre of gravity of power on this planet is moving inexorably eastward . . . The Asia-Pacific region brings much that is dynamic and positive to this world, but as yet the rapid change therein is neither stable nor embedded in stable institutions. Until this is achieved, it is the strategic responsibility of Europeans and North Americans, and the institutions they

²⁴ ‘Must they be wars without end?’.

²⁵ ‘Afghanistan and NATO: Forging the 21st Century Alliance’, 29 February 2008; available on Brookings website.

²⁶ Paul Gallis, ‘NATO in Afghanistan’, CRS Report for Congress, 23 October 2007.

have built, to lead the way . . . security effectiveness in such a world is impossible without both legitimacy and capability.²⁷

The only way to protect the international system the West has built, the author continues, is to ‘re-energize’ the transatlantic relationship: ‘There can be no systemic security without Asian security, and there will be no Asian security without a strong role for the West therein.’

These ambitions have yet to be realized. In Afghanistan there were angry street demonstrations against Karzai’s signing of the US bases agreement—a clear indication, if one was still needed, that NATO will have to take Karzai with them if they withdraw. Uzbekistan responded by asking the United States to withdraw its base and personnel from their country. The Russians and Chinese are reported to have protested strongly in private, and subsequently conducted joint military operations on each other’s territory for the first time: ‘concern over apparent US plans for permanent bases in Afghanistan and Central Asia’ was an important cause of their rapprochement.²⁸ More limply, Iran responded by increasing export duties, bringing construction in Herat to a halt.²⁹

There are at least two routes out of the Khyber impasse. The first and worst would be to Balkanize the country. This appears to be the dominant pattern of imperial hegemony at the moment, but whereas the Kurds in Iraq and the Kosovars and others in the former Yugoslavia were willing client-nationalists, the likelihood of Tajiks or Hazaras playing this role effectively is more remote in Afghanistan. Some US intelligence officers have been informally discussing the creation of a Pashtun state that unites the tribes and dissolves the Durand Line, but this would destabilize Pakistan and Afghanistan to such a degree that the consequences would be unpredictable. In any event there appear to be no takers in either country at the moment.

The alternative would require a withdrawal of all US forces, either preceded or followed by a regional pact to guarantee Afghan stability for the

²⁷ Julian Lindley-French, ‘Big World, Big Future, Big NATO’, *NATO Review*, Winter 2005.

²⁸ Rubin, ‘Proposals for Improved Stability in Afghanistan’.

²⁹ In response to Karzai’s pleas, Teheran proposed a treaty that would prohibit foreign intelligence operations in each country against the other; hard to see how Karzai could have signed this with a straight face.

next ten years. Pakistan, Iran, India, Russia and, possibly, China could guarantee and support a functioning national government, pledged to preserve the ethnic and religious diversity of Afghanistan and create a space in which all its citizens can breathe, think and eat every day. It would need a serious social and economic plan to rebuild the country and provide the basic necessities for its people. This would not only be in the interests of Afghanistan, it would be seen as such by its people—physically, politically and morally exhausted by decades of war and two occupations. Violence, arbitrary or deliberate, has been their fate for too long. They want the nightmare to end and not be replaced with horrors of a different kind. Religious extremists would get short shrift from the people if they disrupted an agreed peace and began a jihad to recreate the Taliban Emirate of Mullah Omar.

The US occupation has not made this task easy. Its predictable failures have revived the Taliban, and increasingly the Pashtuns are uniting behind them. But though the Taliban have been entirely conflated with al-Qaeda in the Western media, most of their supporters are driven by local concerns; their political evolution would be more likely to parallel that of Pakistan's domesticated Islamists if the invaders were to leave. A NATO withdrawal could facilitate a serious peace process. It might also benefit Pakistan, provided its military leaders abandoned foolish notions of 'strategic depth' and viewed India not as an enemy but as a possible partner in creating a cohesive regional framework within which many contentious issues could be resolved. Are Pakistan's military leaders and politicians capable of grasping the nettle and moving their country forward? Will Washington let them? The solution is political, not military. And it lies in the region, not in Washington or Brussels.