

# War on Terror: A Perspective from Afghanistan

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## Brief Analysis

**D**uring the Soviet occupation, Afghanistan enjoyed a large measure of support from its neighbors and from allies in the Islamic and Western worlds. With the fall of the Soviet empire, however, global attention shifted elsewhere. In the interim, a vacuum emerged that allowed the Taliban and al-Qaeda to seize power. For years, Afghanistan constituted the very core of international terrorism, but it was not until the tragic events of September 11, 2001, that the country once again became the focus of the international community. Now, for the first time in over twenty years, there is a real opportunity to create a stable, prosperous, and democratic Afghanistan. Yet, realization of this potential will require the active and sustained involvement of the international community. Although this may prove to be a difficult challenge, the alternative -- a fractious entity that is out of the international eye and open to the reemergence of terrorism -- would prove far more devastating to U.S. interests.

### The Reconstruction Pivot

With the collapse of the Taliban in December 2001, the interim government inherited a country beset by twenty-three years of uninterrupted warfare. As a result, much of Afghanistan's infrastructure and institutional integrity remains severely damaged, and ministries lack sufficient resources. Over three million students are returning to school faced with an underequipped educational establishment, while some five million refugees who fled to neighboring countries are returning in the tens of thousands every week, posing a considerable strain on other government resources. In addition, over ten million landmines have rendered significant tracts of agricultural land uninhabitable, further hampering the repatriation effort. Despite these challenges, the country has real potential for growth and prosperity. Afghanistan's centralized location makes it an ideal trade, transit, and communications corridor between the resource-rich Central Asian republics and the emerging markets of Southeast Asia and the Persian Gulf. In addition, the possibilities for foreign investment are augmented by good weather and a large and industrious expatriate community that is eager to contribute.

That said, additional assistance is essential. Although the United States and other nations have already made significant commitments, the level of international support promised by the Tokyo Conference remains insufficient. The World Bank estimates that Afghanistan will require an additional \$15 -- 20 billion over the next five to ten years. Hence, the international community, led by the United States, should undertake a serious review of reconstruction efforts and expand its commitments. Public perception will play a pivotal role in the transition toward stability; real peace can only be attained through serious reconstruction, and the United States must show the Afghan people that it is improving their everyday lives. A sustained commitment to the development of institutions and infrastructure (particularly roads, communications, and irrigation systems) is a necessary complement to ongoing counterinsurgency efforts.

### Challenges to Consolidation

Narcotics production and the unchecked power of regional authorities (or "warlords," as they are referred to in the

West) remain two of the most significant challenges for the interim government. The narcotics trade is particularly salient with respect to U.S. security interests, given the historical precedent of cooperation between drug lords and terrorist groups. Current estimates indicate that nearly 30 percent of Afghanistan's territory is devoted to opium cultivation. Although the interim government has initiated several eradication programs using domestic resources and the support of local authorities, such efforts have met with only partial success. This is not due to a lack of government control in these areas; rather, internationally funded compensation packages for farmers have proven insufficient in lieu of sustainable rural development. In fact, in some areas where opium cultivation did not previously pose a problem, farmers have begun to grow the crop in the hopes of receiving similar economic concessions. Accordingly, the only means of effectively ending the drug trade is for the international community to offer a comprehensive support program aimed at promoting alternative forms of agricultural development. Such a program would need to cover the entire country, adopting a grassroots approach toward addressing the concerns of all involved (farmers, landlords, drug traffickers, and law enforcement) before expanding to regional and, eventually, international coordination.

Regarding regional "warlords," the decentralization of authority usually has less to do with resistance to central governance than with Kabul's ability to fulfill its promises. Recent successes, including the collection of over \$40 million in tax revenue, have been limited in scope. The dearth of effective security institutions has proven particularly problematic. The consolidation of the national army and police force as well as the revivification of the judiciary should be expedited. Moreover, the international community should continue to play a vital role in security. Expanding the mandate of the International Security Assistance Force is one way of maintaining a visible deterrent outside Kabul without risking open conflict against regional strongmen. Equally promising is the development of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), an American concept wherein small groups of 100 to 200 military and civilian personnel are deployed to different parts of the country. PRTs have been successful largely because they are able to address security concerns while simultaneously promoting reconstruction efforts.

#### Whither Afghan-Pakistani Relations?

Afghanistan's relations with its eastern neighbor are hindered by the serious threat still posed by Taliban and al-Qaeda remnants. Of particular concern are infiltration along the border regions and the active involvement of Pakistan-based Taliban leaders in destabilizing reconstruction efforts. More recently, border incidents between Afghan and Pakistani forces have exacerbated the fallout over the recent attack on the Pakistani embassy in Kabul. Finally, the hostile attitudes adopted by some in the media have proven detrimental, including recent reports purporting to link bouts of sectarian violence in Baghram to Afghan instigators.

Fortunately, there is much potential for improvement. Relations between the two nations have continued unabated at the highest levels of government. Moreover, Pakistan has made a real effort to promote regional stability by detaining key al-Qaeda figures and fulfilling its obligations as an active member of the antiterror coalition. For its part, Afghanistan continues to work toward improving bilateral ties. Most notably, the interim government accepted responsibility for its failure to protect the Pakistani embassy in Kabul, with President Hamid Karzai issuing a public apology to the Pakistani government. Despite these efforts, the United States must still play an essential role in promoting regional engagement on issues of concern while underscoring a policy of noninterference in Afghanistan's domestic affairs. Although a tripartite mechanism for negotiation is already entrenched with respect to Pakistan, real progress can occur only when security matters are framed within the context of the global war on terror.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Evan Langenhahn.

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