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TESTIMONY

Ending Afghanistan's Civil War

JAMES DOBBINS

CT-276

March 2007

Testimony presented before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on March 8, 2007

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Ending Afghanistan's Civil War[2]

Before the Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

March 8, 2007

The resurgence of civil war in Afghanistan can be attributed to two fundamental causes. One is the failure of the United States, the Karzai administration, and the rest of the international community to take advantage of the lull following the collapse of the Taliban regime in late 2001 to strengthen the new Afghan government. The second cause is the fragmentation of the international coalition that the United States put together to stabilize and reconstruct Afghanistan.

Afghanistan has experienced civil war since the late 1970's. Unlike the recent or current conflicts in Yugoslavia and Iraq, which arose principally from hostilities among their constituent nationalities, Afghanistan's war has largely been the product of external interventions. In the 1980s, the Soviet Union and the United States used Afghanistan as a battleground in their global competition. In the 1990s, Pakistan, India, Russia, and Iran supported competing Afghan factions in order to protect and extend their influences in the region. Relations among Afghanistan's various ethnic, religious, and linguistic communities became much more difficult, but these tensions were primarily the result of civil war rather than the cause.

Many Americans believe that in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the Bush Administration formed a multinational coalition that drove the Taliban from power. It would be more accurate, however, to say that the United States joined Russia, India, Iran, and the Northern Alliance in an existing coalition that had been fighting the Taliban for half a decade. With the addition of American airpower and the removal of Pakistani support for their opponent, the coalition prevailed. As a result, Northern Alliance troops, which had been equipped, trained, and financed by Russia, India, and Iran, occupied most of the country.

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[2] This testimony is available for free download at http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT276.

If credit for America's military victory in Afghanistan needs to be shared with this unlikely coalition, so must credit for America's diplomatic achievement in rapidly installing a broadly based successor regime.

When named as the American envoy to the Afghan opposition in October of 2001, I concluded that the United States would not succeed in halting civil war in Afghanistan without the support of the governments responsible for that war in the first place. This belief stemmed from my experience a few years earlier in the Balkans, in particular from observing Richard Holbrook's success in orchestrating the Dayton negotiations that ended the civil war in Bosnia. That war had been the product of Serbian and Croatian ambitions. Presidents Milosevic and Tudjman had been personally guilty of the genocide we were trying to stop. Only by engaging them, bringing them to the conference table, and making them partners in the peace process were we able, however, to persuade all the Bosnian factions to lay down their arms. I believed that a similar approach was needed to achieve a comparable result in Afghanistan.

By November we were working with the United Nations to bring all factions of the Afghan opposition together in Bonn, Germany where we hoped they would agree upon an interim constitution and the membership of a new government. The UN's initial inclination had been to sequester the Afghan representatives in order to prevent any foreign government from exerting a malign influence over their deliberations.

I made the opposite case that only by bringing states like Iran, Pakistan, India and Russia into the process would we have some chance of reaching a consensus. I argued that Afghans would only agree if they were subjected to convergent pressures by their foreign sponsors. Incidentally, this was exactly how it worked out: each of those governments, and particularly Russia and Iran, played positive and essential roles in forging the compromises upon which the Afghans ultimately agreed. Pakistan was also present at the Bonn Conference, but its role was uncomfortable due to the presence of its former adversaries. Nevertheless, Pakistan's acquiescence in the process and support for the result was essential for the consensus' durability.

In the aftermath of this collective achievement, the United States and the rest of the international community had a golden occasion to help Afghans build an effective government capable of providing its population with the most basic public services. Al Qaeda was smashed, and its remaining members were forced into hiding. The Taliban was discredited in Afghanistan and dispersed in Pakistan. Neither was capable of posing an immediate threat to the new regime in Kabul.

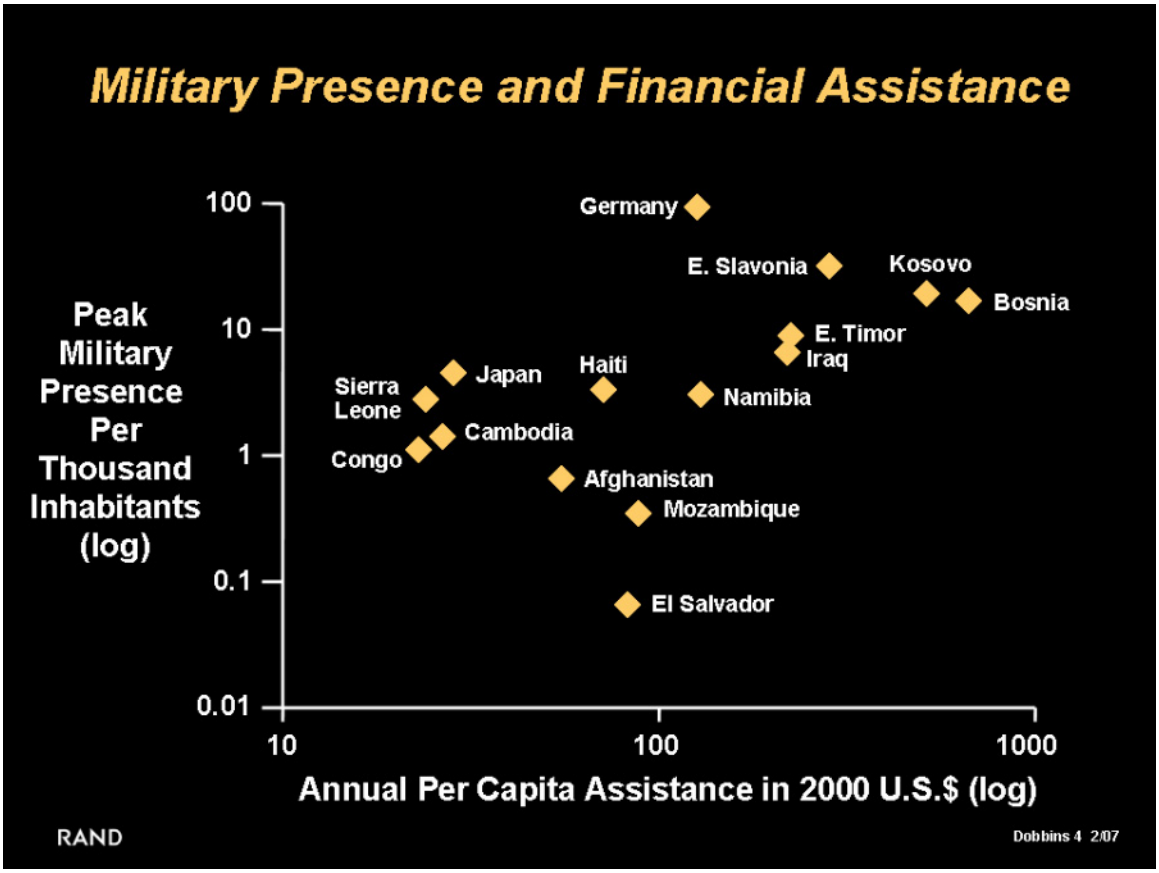
We failed to seize that opportunity. During those early years, U.S. and international assistance was minimal. While blame for that negligence must be widely shared, the failure principally reflected the American administrations early aversion to nation building. Well into 2003 the Administration was quite vocal in touting the merits of its “low profile, small footprint” alternative to the more robust nation building efforts that the Clinton Administration had led in Bosnia and Kosovo. Many felt that generous international assistance had made those Balkan countries dependent upon foreign funding and foreign troops, something we were going to avoid in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In pursuit of this narrow vision of nation building, the United States initially sought to minimize the size, geographical scope, and functions of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Washington rejected pleas from Karzai and the UN to deploy international peacekeepers outside Kabul. It opposed any role for NATO in Afghanistan. It also refused to assign peacekeeping functions to American forces. Security for the Afghan population was to remain the responsibility of regional warlords until a new national army could be recruited, trained, and deployed, a process which would have taken years to complete.

Economic assistance to Afghanistan was also commensurately low. In the first year following the collapse of the Taliban, the United States committed approximately $500 million in reconstruction aid to Afghanistan. Compare that figure to the $18 billion in economic assistance the Administration requested for Iraq, a country of comparable size, greater wealth and less damage in 2003. For the first two years after the fall of the Taliban, the average Afghan received approximately $50 per year in foreign aid. By contrast, the average Kosovar received ten times more than that over the same period of time and the average Bosnian received twelve times more assistance.

If there is any lesson to be drawn from the Afghan experiment with frugal nation building, it is “low input, low output.” If one applies low levels of military manpower and economic assistance to post conflict reconstruction, one can expect to see low levels of public security and economic growth.

As indicated in the chart below, drawn from a RAND study (The UN’s Role in Nation Building: From the Congo to Iraq, RAND, 2005), Afghanistan has received the least amount of resources out of any major American-led, nation building operation over the last 60 years.



Experience has shown that in major combat, it is possible to substitute firepower and technology for manpower, enabling smaller, more agile forces to rapidly prevail over much larger, less advanced adversaries. Experience has also shown, however, that in stabilization and reconstruction operations, there is no substitute for manpower, money, and time. By 2004, the Administration began to recognize these realities and to adjust its aid and military manning levels accordingly: US assistance and troop levels climbed steeply, NATO was invited to take over the ISAF mission, and international peacekeepers were finally dispatched to the provinces.

Two vital years had been lost, however—years during which little progress had been made in extending effective governance to the countryside. As a result, by the time the threat of civil war reemerged, the population in the affected areas had been given little incentive to risk their lives for a government that could neither protect them nor advance their material well-being.

This history explains why anti-regime insurgents have found local populations receptive to their efforts to overturn the Karzai regime and expel the international presence, but it does not explain why this threat has reemerged. The current insurgency in Afghanistan does not arise from deep-seated opposition among large elements of the Afghan population toward their government.

Instead, this insurgency has been raised by residents of Pakistan, some of whom are refugees from Afghanistan, others of whom are native Pakistanis.

For the tens of millions of Pashtun tribesmen on both sides of the current border, this distinction is of little importance. This is a Pashtun insurgency. I don't mean to suggest that all Pashtuns are insurgents, simply that all insurgents are Pashtuns. The insurgency is organized, funded, trained and directed from Pakistan, where most Pashtuns live, and where most Pashtuns have always lived. Pashtuns generally do not recognize the current border between the two countries as legitimate. They believe themselves to represent a majority of the Afghan population, and therefore, they claim a predominant role in its government.

The degree of official Pakistani complicity in this insurgency is a matter of some controversy. In private, knowledgeable U.S., NATO, Afghan and UN officials are nearly unanimous in asserting that the Pakistani intelligence service continues to collaborate with the Taliban and other insurgent groups operating out of its border regions against Afghanistan. For its part, the Pakistani government, at the highest levels, denies any official sanction for these activities, suggesting that, at most, these reports reflect the activity of former members of its intelligence service acting independently and against government policy.

The U.S. Administration has complained loudly about Iranian support for sectarian violence in Iraq. At this point, lacking access to the intelligence data, it is difficult to fully assess the degree of official Iranian support for civil war in Iraq, or official Pakistani support for civil war in Afghanistan. What seems indisputably clear, however, is that Pakistani citizens, residents, money and territory are playing a much greater role in the Afghan civil war than are Iranian citizens, residents, money or territory in the Iraqi civil war.

The RAND Corporation has conducted several studies on nation building and counterinsurgency drawing on dozens of American and non-American case studies over the past century. One conclusion reached highlights the near impossibility of putting together broken societies without the support of neighboring states, and of suppressing well established insurgencies that enjoy external support and neighboring sanctuary. The validity of this lesson is evident today both in Iraq and Afghanistan.

It is clear that Pakistan has both geopolitical and domestic political incentives for destabilizing its neighbor. Geopolitically, Pakistan fears an independent Afghan state aligned with India. Domestically, Pakistani elites would prefer to seen Pashtun ambitions externalized, in the pursuit of power in Afghanistan, rather than turned inward, in the pursuit of greater autonomy, or even

independence for Pashtunistan. Even if these incentives do not lead Pakistani officials to foment civil war in Afghanistan, they may diminish their commitment to helping suppress it. The United States and the rest of the international community need to offset these incentives to destabilize Afghanistan with a greater array of incentives and disincentive designed to lead Pakistan to assert control over its own territory and population and prevent either from being used against neighbor.

Often one hears that the decision to invade Iraq in 2003 diverted American manpower and money Afghanistan. This may be true. But a more serious charge is that the war in Iraq has diverted American attention from the real central front in this war, which neither in Iraq or Afghanistan, but in Pakistan. Al Qaeda, after all, is headquartered in Pakistan. The Taliban is operating out of Pakistan, as are several other insurgent and terrorist groups seeking to expel international forces from Afghanistan. It was Pakistan that assisted the North Korean and Iranian nuclear programs. Potential terrorists in Western societies still travel to Pakistan for inspiration, guidance, support and direction.

Yet if Pakistan is the central front in the war on terror, it is not one susceptible to a military response. We are not going to bomb Islamabad or invade Waziristan. An increase in US military manpower and money for Afghanistan may be needed to contain the renewed insurgency and prevent the Karzai government from being overthrown. But the US and NATO troops are likely to be required indefinitely as long at the Taliban and the other insurgent groups are able to recruit, train, raise funds and organize their operations in Pakistan.

Afghanistan has never been a self sufficient state, and it probably never will be. It is simply too poor to be able to provide security and effective governance to its large and dispersed population. So unless the Pakistani government can be persuaded to abandon its relationship with extremist elements within its society, halt its support for terrorism, provide its youth an educational alternative to fundamentalist madrasas, extend effective governance into its border provinces, and curtail their use by insurgent movements, the United States and its allies are going to be forced to patrol Afghanistan's Southeast Frontier indefinitely, just as Great Britain was compelled to conduct a counterinsurgency campaign along the other side of that same frontier throughout the 19th century.

As I have noted, Pakistan is not a problem susceptible to a military solution. Therefore other sources of influence will need to be used. First the United States should intensify quite efforts to encourage both India and Pakistan to resolve their differences over Kashmir, that dispute being the root cause of radicalization in Pakistani society and policy. Second, we need to address the

economic and social needs of the Pashtun populations on both sides of the border, not just in Afghanistan. There is only limited benefit in winning the hearts and minds of Pashtuns resident in Afghanistan, if the larger number of Pashtuns living in Pakistan remain hostile and ungoverned. Third, we need to encourage both the Afghan and Pakistani governments to establish an agreed border regime and legitimize the current frontier. And finally, the U.S. should encourage Pakistan to move back toward civilian rule via free elections. Fundamentalist parties have never fared well in such elections in Pakistan, and are unlikely to do so in the future. It seems ironic that the U.S. has pushed for democratization in Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon, all places where the result was likely to intensify sectarian conflict, but has largely failed to do so in Pakistan, where the opposite result is more likely.

American efforts alone, no matter how intense and skillful, will not be sufficient to achieve any of these objectives. Washington therefore needs to raise the profile of the Pakistan problem internationally, in order to secure a much wider array of pressures upon and of assistance to Pakistan in undertaking these transformations.

At present NATO is manning the Afghan frontier, but doing nothing to address the threat emerging from its other side. This is akin to NATO's guarding the Fulda Gap throughout the Cold War, but have no discussions about how to deal with the Soviet Union. In fact, consultations on the Soviet Union occupied 90% of the every NATO Ministerial and Summit for 40 years. Its time consultations on Pakistan occupied a similarly central place in the transatlantic dialogue.

The recent announcement that the Administration intends to increase its troop and financial commitment to Afghanistan should be welcomed. These steps come five years late, but perhaps not too late. The Afghan people desperately want peace, and they continue to hope that their freely elected government, the United States and NATO can bring it to them. We continue to be welcome in Afghanistan in a way we are not in Iraq. But public support for Karzai, his government, and our presence is diminishing. It is to be hoped that these additional commitments can reverse, or at least slow this negative trend. The more American money and manpower is committed to Afghanistan, however, the more important it becomes to address the principal source of the ongoing civil war, which remains, as it has for most of the past 20 years, largely external, and in present circumstances, largely in Pakistan.

The continuing growth of opium production and drug trafficking in Afghanistan represents a particularly frustrating challenge. U.S. officials are beset by two conflicting imperatives. One is the Hippocratic requirement to "do no harm", i.e. don't do anything that actually makes the situation worst. The second is the political requirement, familiar to Members of Congress as it is to

Administration officials, to “don’t just stand there, do something!” Unfortunately, the latter is usually the more compelling imperative.

The Administrations "five pillar" plan, for dealing with the issue, encompassing interdiction, eradication, alternative livelihood development, judicial reform, and public information, looks at first glance to be more a bureaucratic response to pressures, including Congressional pressures, to be seen doing something rather than a carefully thought through strategy. Certainly these efforts seem to have been entirely ineffective in reducing drug production, while they have, reportedly, antagonized significant elements of the population to no good purpose.

I would suggest the need to put counter-narcotics firmly within a broader strategy designed to defeat the insurgency and strengthen the Afghan governments support within the population. That strategy needs to be based upon a careful examination of both the economics and politics of the drug trade. The most important measures of success should not be increased seizures, or reduced poppy production, neither of which is likely to have any measurable impact upon drug consumption in Western Europe, where most of this product goes. Rather the objectives should be to reduce the flow of drug money into the hands of corrupt government officials and insurgent groups. Of the two, incidentally, it seems almost certain that much more of this money is going to corrupt officials than insurgents, since the former control much more of the territory and transit routes involved.

This suggests to me a strategy that would give principal emphasis to interdiction and judicial reform, while eschewing eradication and promoting alternate development only once genuinely viable alternatives can be offered.

As to a public information campaign, this will be more credibly conducted by local religious leaders than by a government known to be riddled with drug corruption or foreigners whose motives are suspect. In Afghanistan, the clergy is, in principal, publicly funded, as is the case in many of our most democratic West European allies. Unfortunately, this is one area of Afghan government activity that international donors have been least inclined to fund. Finding ways to allow the Afghan government to better fund not just the village schools, but the village mosques could well be one of the most effective things we could do to delegitimize drug production, and increase public support for the current regime.