Silk Road to Success

S. Frederick Starr

AFGHANISTAN'S October elections left many experts with egg on their faces. Armed with impressions gleaned from a few days in Kabul, and often not even that, they assured the public that the elections were doomed, and that reckless U.S. policies would be responsible for their failure. Security was woefully inadequate, we learned, and the Afghan public—especially women—would be intimidated by Taliban threats to disrupt the voting. Bloodshed, low turnout and gross corruption were all but inevitable, and the whole mess would be due to the Bush Administration's intemperate desire to push the voting up to before the American elections.

Defying these grim predictions, Afghan voters, including women, turned out in droves, and the voting on the whole passed smoothly, with negligible violence. True, there were problems with the ink used to mark voters' thumbs, and double voting doubtless occurred. But the vice chair of the UN's electoral panel concluded that overall the process was "safe and orderly." Other observers termed the elections "a triumph", citing the high turnout and the failure of Taliban forces to disrupt them.

The relative success of Afghanistan's elections is all the more surprising given the conventional wisdom that the U.S. effort in Afghanistan is failing.[1] The General Accounting Office reported in June on "Deteriorating Security and Limited Resources" in Afghanistan, while NATO's Secretary General warned that its Afghan mission was "flirting with failure."

That might have been true a year ago. The post-9/11 Pentagon, in crafting policy towards Afghanistan, had focused narrowly on wiping out Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, with inadequate attention paid to issues of security and governance. The tactical decision to arm and support the nearly moribund Northern Alliance as the only anti-Taliban force on the ground unwittingly turned into a much closer relationship than was desirable or intended. When the United States finally toppled the Taliban, Tajiks from the Northern Alliance took control of Kabul, packing the new government with their own supporters to the exclusion of everyone else. The UN's 2001 Bonn meetings ratified this dangerous situation, and the 2002 "emergency loya jirga" further ratified the Bonn conference's mistakes.

While U.S. officials talked bravely of "working the situation", Northern Alliance leaders in Kabul consolidated their hold on power. Marshal Fahim, confirmed in Bonn as Afghanistan's Minister

S. Frederick Starr is chairman of the Central Asia Caucus Institute at Johns Hopkins University in Washington, DC.

[1] See, for example, Kathy Gannon, "Afghanistan Unbound", *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2004).

of Defense, kept his own militia lodged in the capital and cut deals with warlords elsewhere, undermining hopes for a national army. He and his family seized control of key markets to create their own income stream, independent of Karzai and the United States. Many Pashtuns went into sullen opposition as they watched this unfold. A few took up arms. Since most Taliban leaders had been Pashtun, this gave the appearance of a Taliban revival. It was in fact a new movement of Pashtuns and other groups excluded from the post-Taliban order. Because the United States backed Karzai, they blamed their fate on America.

All this further weakened the fragile Karzai government. Charged with rooting out remnants of Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, the United States worked with whatever forces were at hand, including warlords aligned with Karzai's enemies within the government. This approach also jeopardized efforts by other U.S. agencies. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was effective in providing emergency humanitarian relief, but continuing security problems complicated its efforts to rebuild schools and clinics, print and distribute millions of textbooks, reconstruct irrigation systems, and introduce high-yield seeds that could boost wheat harvests. NGOs used U.S. taxpayer money and grants from other countries and agencies to dig wells, open medical clinics and meet other basic needs, but continued insecurity and insufficient attention to issues of governance put this, too, at risk.

Thus, Afghanistan by the end of 2002 seemed headed in the wrong direction. Having escaped the Scylla of Taliban rule and domination by Al-Qaeda, the country was now heading for the Charybdis of a weak and ineffective central government, a countryside under warlord control, and much of the public increasingly alienated. In short, Afghanistan seemed to be again on the verge of becoming a failed state, the very condition that gave rise to U.S. intervention in the first place.

A Mid-Course Correction

IN APRIL 2003, Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld went to Afghanistan to see for himself what was happening there. He concluded that U.S. efforts there were not on track, and called for new initiatives to revive them. The Pentagon, the NSC and the State Department joined forces to prepare a new government-wide policy that could be taken to the president. In a graceful euphemism, they described the new policy not as a strategic about-face but merely an acceleration of the old. It was one of the most effective interagency collaborations that Washington had seen in decades.

In turn, the Bush Administration promptly engaged coalition members and UN officials, making them partners and leveraging America's input of personnel, equipment and money. At the same time, it made it clear that this new policy would be worked out and executed *with* the Afghans, rather than being done *to* them.

In June, President Bush approved the new policy, called "On Accelerating the Program in Afghanistan." Bush also charged Afghanistan-born Presidential Envoy Zalmay Khalilzad with responsibility for implementing the program.[2]

Interim President Hamid Karzai was already moving along lines similar to the new policy. In late 2002 he appointed the experienced Ali Jalali to be minister of the interior and brought in Abdul Rahim Wardak as deputy minister of defense to be a voice of responsibility under the

[2]The NSC announced the new program in September 2003, but the announcement was so modest the press barely noticed it. Khalilzad reported on the new policy in his confirmation hearings, but this was lost in the pre-Thanksgiving crush of other news.

intractable and corrupt Fahim. Jalali immediately began replacing governors who were themselves warlords or were in league with local warlords. More than half of the governors and two-thirds of the provincial police chiefs have now been replaced. Meanwhile, in May 2003 Minister of Finance Ghani hammered out an agreement on turning over customs money to Kabul, increasing the central government's resources by 25 percent. These and similar measures were the essential steps towards breaking the clan system and creating a more professional government.

By the end of 2003 many key U.S. officials had embraced a more optimistic view of Afghanistan. Such a perspective informs the program "Accelerating Success." The initiative has four goals: first, to achieve a reasonable ethnic and regional balance in the staffing of central and provincial offices; second, to build an army and a police force; third, to improve governance at all levels; and fourth, to speed the pace of economic and social reconstruction.

A fifth goal concerns process—namely, to achieve these objectives by lending support to the Afghan government rather than doing it alone. Heading the execution of these policies on the U.S. side is Presidential Envoy Khalilzad, with all other key U.S. figures in Kabul working through a council chaired by him.

In implementing this policy, Karzai has shown a strong but deft hand. He recognized Fahim as the greatest force for disunity and corruption, and bluntly told him he had no choice but to yield total control of his ministry. The deftness showed when, after installing competent and ethnically diverse deputies under Fahim, Karzai let Fahim remain minister. It showed again when he held out to Fahim the prospect of a symbolic post as his vice presidential candidate in the October 2004 elections and then, at just the right moment, dumped him in favor of a brother of the late Tajik hero, Massoud. It did not hurt that Khalilzad had earlier sat both Karzai and Fahim down and told them they had to work together.

TO SUCCEED, the new policy had to convince alienated Pashtuns that their voice was now audible in government. This meant reaching out to moderate former Taliban. With U.S. backing, Karzai entered into conversation with such figures, going so far as to extend a hand to more intransigent emigré mullahs across the Pakistan border in Peshawar.

American critics of U.S. policy complain that the Pentagon erred in delaying the formation of the Afghan National Army (ANA). Early efforts to organize the ANA failed because Fahim simply filled the ranks of the new force with his own loyalists, many of them unfit for a national army. Pashtuns quickly saw what was happening and quit the ANA in droves. But following the policy change, as Afghans across the land saw that "their kind" of people were finding places in the new government, it was possible to move forward with the ANA. The government launched another appeal for volunteers and this time they came forward in numbers.

The new policy also called for laying down a marker with the main warlords. Karzai and his American supporters therefore bluntly informed them that unless they began cooperating with the government they would be marginalized. International units had to back up such threats with credible force. This meant expanding the International Security and Assistance Force and getting it to operate beyond the confines of Kabul. The slowness with which this has proceeded is more than offset by the rapid expansion of coalition forces. Today the coalition's numbers have grown from 12,000 to almost 20,000 troops, 15 percent of them

from America's coalition partners. Their ability to show up on short notice anywhere in the country, increasingly accompanied by ANA troops, throws remaining warlords on the defensive.

Closely coordinated with these developments is the steady expansion of the ANA, which now boasts 13,700 soldiers and will double that number by the end of 2005. The ANA cannot yet operate fully on its own. But when ANA contingents participated in face-offs between warlords in Faryab province in October 2003, and then in Herat this August, they were a significant factor in achieving positive outcomes. It is therefore no wonder that the ANA is oversubscribed with recruits.

The scales are tipping against the warlords, making their demobilization an attainable goal. A national agreement on "Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration" that Karzai worked out this April went nowhere at first. But the 2004 goal of 18,000 demobilized warlord troops will now be met ahead of schedule. In September, General Wardak announced that all heavy weapons controlled by warlords (including Fahim himself) had been removed from Kabul.

The transition from warlordism to a national army depends on the Afghans' success in making deals with the former warlords. With a general amnesty in force, Karzai must offer a face-saving role to every demobilized militia commander not guilty of criminal acts.

Both Karzai and Khalilzad had assured Uzbek warlord Abdul Dostum of an honorable role once he demobilized his private army. But Dostum wanted more and attacked a rival warlord, defying Karzai to stop him. In the end Karzai, with United States, UN and British backing, succeeded in forcing both warlords to demobilize several thousand troops each. Both retain some forces today, but their usefulness is limited to helping the two save face as they play out their respective endgames.

A similar *opera buffo* was played out this August in Herat, where a Pashtun warlord named Shah, nominally loyal to Karzai, attacked the warlord boss of Herat, Ismail Khan. The United States sent in coalition forces backed up by some 1,000–1,500 ANA troops. Both warlords got the message. Shah was ordered to Kabul under house arrest, while Khan, his weakness exposed, petitioned the ANA and coalition for support. When Karzai sacked him, there was a flurry of protests but then scarcely a murmur. Khan's future remains uncertain as of this writing, but one thing is clear: It will be defined more by Karzai and Kabul than by Khan himself or his old network in Herat.

The Situation Today

THE ARMY is the major bulwark of Afghanistan's future security, but the police are equally important. The UN assigned Germany the task of developing the new police forces, but besides setting up a police academy, Germany achieved little. In 2004 the United States stepped in. Working with Interior Minister Jalali, it championed the concept of an Afghan National Police Force and built seven regional training centers. About 20,000 new police have already gone through these programs, with the total force of 62,000 expected to complete training by the end of 2005.

The 2002 Bonn Conference parceled out responsibility for rebuilding the Afghan state to various nations. Much work done under these initiatives was more form than substance, as countries were unwilling to commit the necessary personnel and money. During the past year, the United States has taken the bull by the horns. Before last winter's constitutional loya jirga, it helped Karzai resist calls by Germany and others to federalize Afghanistan, a move that would have opened the entire apparatus of state to

"colonization" by clans. Since then, America has funded hundreds of advisors to assist the new ministry staffs as they introduce competence-based hiring. The United States is also establishing a Civil Service Academy in Kabul to prepare new generations of qualified administrators. Such initiatives are gradually putting the UN-mandated government in Kabul in charge of the country. Step by step, the government is starting to look serious, not only in Kabul but in the provinces as well.

The Afghans themselves have initiated measures to strengthen their government, including the decision for the government to coordinate the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The several thousand NGOs working in Afghanistan helped avert the humanitarian crisis that was widely predicted in late 2001. But their achievement had a negative side.

Committed to rendering assistance as quickly as possible, many NGOs all but ignored the Afghan government, which seemed to them more a source of roadblocks than help. Soon they had created what were in effect parallel structures at every level. They hired the most capable locals and paid them far more than they could receive as civil servants. By so doing, NGOs undermined efforts to upgrade Afghan governance.

At the December 2003 donors meeting in Tokyo, Minister of Finance Ghani demanded that all NGOs register and provide information on their activities. He also announced the formation of the Afghanistan Assistance Coordination Authority to oversee the flow of external funds into the country. The donor countries approved.

Good governance must include citizen participation. By ratifying the Northern Alliance's power grab, the Bonn conference convinced many Afghans that their voices would never be heard in government. But the second constitutional loya jirga in December 2003 succeeded in correcting all the mistakes committed in Bonn.

Its achievement was to bring the Pashtuns and Hazaras back into the national polity. Germany may have provided the tent, but the measures that enabled excluded groups to feel fully vested in the new Afghanistan trace to Afghan moderates and the solid support they received from the United States.

Skeptics predicted that impoverished Afghans would take no interest in elections, but 85 percent of those eligible actually participated. The same skeptics predicted that Pashtuns at the loya jirga would turn the tables by purging Tajiks and Uzbeks, but this did not happen. These shows of responsibility and moderation convinced many foreign governments and Afghans themselves that Afghans were capable of self-government. Its self-confidence renewed, the Kabul government moved to establish elective councils at the provincial and district levels. Americans will help this project by setting up a massive program of training courses for elected members of these councils.

MEANWHILE, national elections loomed. The killing of twelve election workers by "Taliban" forces convinced some observers that elections were doomed. But 10.3 million Afghans registered to vote, more than the UN's estimate of the total eligible. Double registrations doubtless occurred but were a minor flaw. Credit for this success goes to the UN, but it could not have succeeded without the security provided by the Afghan government and its American partner, and without the new spirit of balance they worked to foster.

The high politics of the elections again threw fuel onto the skeptics' fire. Some charged that there were too many candidates for a fair vote; others claimed

that Karzai was running unchallenged. Neither charge is warranted. The large number of aspirants was a credit to Afghans' readiness to engage in elective politics. And any field that included the likes of former Minister of Education Yunos Qanooni, a controversial but qualified professional, was not to be taken lightly. These developments, plus the high number of those who defied intimidation to vote, provides further evidence that Afghanistan has turned the corner from military confrontation to normal, albeit fierce, politics.

Afghans were grateful for humanitarian assistance that saved them from starvation in 2001–02. But as late as the end of last year, few major projects of economic and social development had yielded convincing results. Indeed, the main money for reconstruction came only this past spring. The delay created a potential crisis of rising expectations.

The Pentagon's innovative Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) are an important part of the solution to this problem. PRTs provide a highly visible security presence and also undertake local development projects. Initially, NGOs and some coalition partners criticized the concept for mixing security and development. But when Afghans welcomed them, doubts vanished. Today many countries are sponsoring the 19 PRTs, although those in dangerous provinces are mainly staffed by Americans.

Equally important was the reconstruction of roads and bridges. Regional trade is the most powerful engine for economic development in Afghanistan and Central Asia generally. This year the Kabul-Kandahar highway rebuilt by the United States and Japan cut travel time between those two centers by two-thirds. When the United States persuaded Japan and Saudi Arabia to rebuild the long segment of the national "Ring Road" to Herat, this prompted Uzbekistan, India and Iran to build further links to adjacent countries.

Who will link the Ring Road with the Arabian Sea to the south? Russia, India and Iran are building a new Iranian terminal that will enable India to import gas and products from Central Asia and Afghanistan without crossing Pakistan. China and Pakistan meanwhile are constructing a major port at Gwadar, west of Karachi, with links to Kandahar. Whoever wins this geopolitical competition, Afghanistan benefits.

The United States is moving ahead with hundreds of other projects. USAID, for example, is training classroom teachers, 30,000 of whom will have completed the courses by the end of 2005. Scores of clinics, power generating stations, and even industrial parks are being put in place. An American University will soon rise in Kabul.

No less important than the sheer quantity of such projects is the fact that Afghans figure prominently in nearly all of them. Thus, PRTs are overseen by a council chaired by Minister of Interior Jalali. The Afghan government is organizing local councils to guide development in the country's 20,000 villages. Women figure prominently in those already functioning. All this activity is developing a normal market-based economy in a country that has not known one for two generations.

DESPITE the naysayers, military, social, political and economic stabilization is well underway in Afghanistan. Increasingly, the country's security is protected by Afghans themselves. New institutions are reviving and strengthening the unitary state that existed in Afghanistan prior to the Soviet invasion. Elective principles are gaining adherents. Declining levels of political violence enable Afghans to focus attention on the economy, which grew by 30 percent in 2003 and will reach 24 percent this year. When donor countries this March raised their earlier commitment of

$4.5 billion over three to five years to the same amount for a single year, they did so as investors, encouraged by the fledgling enterprise's progress. Afghanistan now has a reasonable chance of becoming, over time, a normal and prosperous country.

To be sure, Afghanistan is still a land of misery, the world's poorest country after Sierra Leone. It is still a dangerous place, where rockets can still be launched against senior officials and where even a walk in one's apricot orchard can end in bloodshed caused by an exploding landmine.

Nor can one ignore the drug trade. Afghanistan is again the world's chief producer of opium and heroin, with fully half of its GDP deriving from these products. But it is unwarranted to ascribe this problem to the "failure" of U.S. policy. There has been no policy to fail, and precious little money. In 2002 the United States allocated a mere $23 million and nothing in 2003 for the struggle against narcobusiness in Afghanistan. Only now is the U.S. government drafting an action program for eradicating drugs.

Opium production, however, is not driven by domestic demand. Afghans produce heroin because of unquenchable demand in Europe. Nor are Afghans wallowing in the profits of this illegal traffic: Less than one twelfth of profits on Afghan heroin ends up in Afghan hands; the rest goes to drug barons in Russia, Turkey, Iran, the Balkans and western Europe itself.[1]

Despite all this, prospects for reducing production in Afghanistan are good. Opium production in Afghanistan was insignificant prior to the Soviet invasion and definitely not an accepted part of the local culture. Even today, barely 5 to 10 percent of Afghans derive their income from drugs. Many development projects that will affect the environment in which drugs now flourish are only now underway. The extension of trade deeper into the countryside, the renewal of irrigation systems, the improvement of internationally marketable crops, the economic empowerment of women, and improved local governance and police all hold promise for narcotics reduction.

Most Afghans are optimistic about the future. This is affirmed by the decision of two million Afghans to return to their homes from Pakistan and another 1.2 million from Iran. These Afghans have concluded that their prospects are better in Afghanistan today than in any other place open to them.

THE COST to the United States has been significant. By late spring 2003, 121 American soldiers had lost their lives in Afghanistan, 53 of them in combat. The cost in money is also considerable. The price tag for a year's operations is $12.4 billion, of which $2.4 billion is for "Accelerating Success." And while it is true that other countries have contributed to reconstruction, the United States is still providing more than 31 of the other donors combined.

What does the United States get from "Accelerating Success"? First, by destroying the Taliban and working with the UN to build a solid new state on Afghan soil, the United States is removing that country from the list of "weak states" that pro-

[1]The comparison with Colombia is instructive. Cocaine production there exists to satisfy North American demand. Whatever one thinks of American anti-drug programs there, the United States accepts responsibility for Colombia's problem and therefore pays $7.5 billion to fund "Plan Colombia." By contrast, Europe, with the partial exception of Britain, does not acknowledge its culpability in Afghanistan's tragedy. Progress against Afghan drugs will begin only when Europeans admit that the problem traces to their own citizens' addictions, and that this obliges them to provide the massive help that the United States extends to Colombia.

vide safe havens for Al-Qaeda. Besides lifting a horrific burden from 25 million Afghans, this sends a clear signal to countries like Saudi Arabia and Pakistan that their support for brutal Islamist regimes will no longer be tolerated.

Second, the United States is attacking in Afghanistan the soil in which extremist regimes germinate, namely poverty. Many Islamist leaders come from the upper middle and upper classes, but they pitch their appeal to the desperate poor. Poverty is especially prevalent in the mountainous regions of Afghanistan. The alleviation of poverty there shows the path to progress in other embattled mountain zones like Kashmir, Chechnya, Karabakh, Nepal, the Balkans and Colombia.

Third, what happens in Afghanistan affects the entire region. To its east lies Pakistan, long isolated from the larger world by wars in Afghanistan and neglected by the United States. To the north lie the new states of Central Asia, for whom the Taliban posed a serious threat that Russia could easily exploit. For both, the transformations wrought by American initiatives in Afghanistan constitute the greatest opportunity for positive change since they gained independence.

This actually understates the achievement. The transformation of Afghanistan is calling back into being an important world region: the true, larger Central Asia. Split by the czarist Russian and later Soviet border and then wracked by fighting for a generation, this ancient cultural and economic region long vanished from the world's consciousness. Now, for the first time since the 19th century, Afghans and the peoples of Central Asia are all independent.

By re-opening ancient east-west and north-south trade routes, the United States and its partners are creating a great new Eurasian economic zone. Afghan trade with Pakistan has grown sixfold in three years and has quadrupled across Iran to the Middle East and Turkey. If the Asia Development Bank succeeds in its $2 billion plan to link India, Pakistan and Afghanistan by roads and railroads, this new economic zone will extend even to South Asia.

WHAT DOES the United States gain from its investment in Afghanistan? Besides immediate benefits, it improves its own long-term security. This occurs as it turns a battle-torn and economically stagnant zone into a peaceful, stable and economically dynamic region ruled by governments that have seen the dangers of extremism and have chosen moderation instead. These moderate states with predominantly Muslim populations view America as a loyal friend. To the rest of the world they present a viable alternative to what has prevailed across most of the Arab Middle East.

Finally, success in Afghanistan underscores the importance of the distinction between *nation-building* and *state-building*. It is surely all but impossible for the United States artificially to create political communities at the national level where none exists. But it can enhance the ability of political communities to govern themselves; help secure the borders and gain international acceptance of their new states; promote a reasonable ethnic or regional balance within governmental institutions; work to enable central governments to collect taxes and deliver essential services across the national territory; help in the introduction of national currencies and promote macroeconomic stabilization; and assist in the creation of local institutions and security arrangements that will give citizens the confidence to rebuild the economy from the bottom up. These basic notions, which transcend the usual fractiousness of U.S. domestic politics, can and should become the guiding principles of future efforts in Iraq and elsewhere. ¬