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Handout
Afghanistan’s Future in the Region and the World

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The international operation that began in Afghanistan after September 11, 2001, was assembled quickly under tremendous pressure by many different organizations pursuing different agendas. While the UN had been engaged in a variety of activities in Afghanistan before September 11, the U.S. had been largely disengaged. Before September 11 different international actors pursued different policies in Afghanistan as follows:

1. The UN Special Mission for Afghanistan, acting under resolutions of the General Assembly (which continued to seat the United Front/Northern Alliance delegation of the Islamic State of Afghanistan), promoted an inter-Afghan dialogue between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance in order to bring peace to Afghanistan by creating a broad-based government that would adhere to a set of principles that all the neighboring countries had agreed to (for Afghanistan – not, of course, for themselves).

2. The Security Council, led by the U.S., enacted a regime of sanctions including a ban on military assistance, against only the Taliban in order to compel them to expel Usama bin Ladin and his associates, charged with responsibility for several terrorist acts including the bombing of the U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. While previous declaratory arms embargoes had applied to all sides, the Security Council resolution embargoed only the Taliban, thus in effect legitimizing military support to anti-Taliban groups (who held the UN seat).

3. The United Nations Office of Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs for Afghanistan attempted to engage with the de facto powers on the ground, which mainly meant the Taliban, in order to deliver rights-based assistance to the people of Afghanistan through Principled Common Programming, coordinated through the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan with all UN agencies, donors and NGOs, it also tried to build peace at the grassroots by supporting local shuras (councils) for community development. UNOCHA protested the one-sided sanctions against the Taliban and conducted a study to show their harmful humanitarian impact.

4. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and several special rapporteurs (on Afghanistan, violence against women and extrajudicial killings) condemned both the Taliban and the
Northern Alliance for their violations of human rights and international humanitarian law.

5. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime attempted to promote alternative livelihoods in opium poppy producing areas by engaging with the Taliban. UNODC conducted surveys of the opium economy and worked with neighboring states on interdiction. The Taliban successfully banned poppy production in 2000 – 2001, but they were referred back to policy no. 2. As a result of the ban, prices increased by the factor of 10, and traffickers increased their share of the revenue from narcotics.

6. Pakistan supported the Taliban in order to achieve strategic depth against India and to create deniable training grounds for “mujahidin” to fight in Kashmir. Iran, Russia, India and the Central Asian states supported various parts of the Northern Alliance to contain the Salafi-Wahhabi terrorist threat.

Bilateral U.S.-Afghan policy was also confused. There were repeated direct contacts between the U.S. and the Taliban including a surprise telephone call by Mullah Umar to the State Department after the missile attacks on Khost in response to the August 1998 embassy bombings, but the U.S. never resolved its laundry list of demands (UBL, drugs, education for women, peace and a broad-based government) into a clear prioritized policy and a statement telling the Taliban what they could expect in return for various courses of action. The Taliban were in any case quite incapable of pursuing diplomacy. The response to the opium ban was intended as a test, which to the Taliban seemed to confirm that concessions led to escalating demands. The U.S. responded with an increase of humanitarian aid, which the Taliban did not perceive as sufficient.

In 1999 the U.S. started intelligence cooperation with the Northern Alliance and helped train intelligence personnel for Ahmad Shah Massoud. The U.S. stated very clearly to both the Taliban and Pakistan that the next attack for which UBL was responsible would lead to a military response aimed at those harboring him, not just at al-Qaida. I heard one such message personally at a second-track meeting in the UK in the summer of 2000. The Clinton administration, however, did not respond to the attack on the U.S.S Cole during the 2000 election campaign, reportedly for lack of clear intelligence tying the attackers to the al-Qaida HQ in Afghanistan. Not surprisingly, Afghans were confused about what the international community wanted.

The Bush administration designed its response in Afghanistan to the events of September 11 as part of its policy of counter-terrorism. According to the published accounts of deliberations by President Bush and the National Security Council on how to respond to September 11, the sole issue discussed at the highest levels from the beginning was how to destroy al-Qaida’s assets in Afghanistan and the Taliban regime. In his speech to the U.S. Congress on September 20th, 2001, President Bush issued an ultimatum to the Taliban: deliver all al-Qaida members to the U.S. and close all terrorist training camps, or, he said, the Taliban would “share in their fate.” He noted that Afghans were also
victims of the Taliban, but all he offered was humanitarian aid.

Over the coming weeks, the State Department proposed that the U.S. turn to the United Nations for help in creating a transitional government and developing a framework for the reconstruction of the country. The Bush administration agreed, provided that the political roadmap did not interfere with the planned military campaign. Secretary-General Kofi Annan asked Lakhdar Brahimi to resume the mission he had suspended in July 1999 to lead this effort. President Bush appointed Ambassador James Dobbins as the U.S. senior coordinator for the transition. Brahimi recruited Ashraf Ghani and me to help prepare and hold the UN Talks on Afghanistan in Germany, commonly known as the Bonn conference.

The core of the Bonn Agreement, inspired in part by Brahimi’s settlement of the Lebanese Civil War during the Taif talks in 1989, was an arrangement under which an interim administration chosen at Bonn and placed in power by the force of U.S. arms would be replaced by gradually more legitimate governments through a series of political events: an Emergency Loya Jirga opened by the former King to choose a transitional administration after 6 months, a constitutional Loya Jirga that would ratify a constitution drafted by a commission appointed by that transitional government and election of a “fully representative government” under that constitution.

The U.S. did more than any other UN member state to assure that these events took place. The Bonn Agreement, however, contained other measures, which were essential for those events to accomplish their intended purposes. Ghani and I saw the strategic goal of the operation as rebuilding the Afghan state, or more precisely, establishing a structure that would empower and assist Afghans to build an Afghan state that would be more stable than its historical predecessors. For many reasons, that project has met with only limited success.

The political reform at the core of the agreement would not succeed without state building. The UN team realized that the control of the country and especially the capital by armed groups could undermine the Loya Jirgas and render the new government impotent or meaningless during their consultations with Afghans in several countries in late October and early November, Brahimi and Ghani heard many groups, in particular women, express concerns about the consequences of the re-empowerment of militias. Several provisions of the Bonn Agreement aimed at creating security conditions to assure that the benchmark political events would have the intended effects, rather than serve as legitimation for rule by the gun.

The most important such measure was the demilitarization of Kabul and major regional centers that had fallen under warlord control. Annex 1 of the Bonn Agreement therefore requested “the United Nations Security Council to consider authorizing the early deployment to Afghanistan of a United
Nations mandated force. This force will assist in the maintenance of security for Kabul and its surrounding areas, such a force could, as appropriate, be progressively expanded to other urban centres and other areas.” The purpose of this force was made clear in the following paragraph: “The participants in the UN Talks on Afghanistan pledge to withdraw all military units from Kabul and other urban centers or other areas in which the UN mandated force is deployed.”

The only portion of these provisions that was implemented as anticipated was the dispatch of ISAF to Kabul and surrounding areas. The capital remained occupied by the Northern Alliance Forces, and the U.S. for several years declined to use any influence to press its partners in the War on Terror to withdraw as promised. Consequently the capital was under dual ISAF and Shura-yi Nazar military control until the summer of 2004. Fahim used his troops to pressure others in the government on several occasions, and the Emergency Loya Jirga, in particular, showed the effects of factional military control. The presence of armed faction members in the capital and other cities also enabled them to gain control over customs revenues, fuel duties, trafficking of natural resources, land and other assets. Thanks to the presence of ISAF, they could do so without fear of setting off open factional war as had happened in the early 1990s.

The U.S. Department of Defense also opposed the expansion of ISAF to areas outside of Kabul, for fear that the presence of “peacekeeping” troops would conflict with its “war fighting” mandate, which, as always, enjoyed priority. It held to this position despite repeated requests to the contrary by President Karzai and the UN Secretary-General. DoD partly relaxed its objections later in 2002, but not until 2003 did it agree to the guarantees of extraction and assistance that other nations demanded as the price for deploying their soldiers outside of Kabul. As a result, warlords who had expected to be dislodged quickly were able to consolidate their control of key areas of the country and claim that they did so with the support of the U.S..

It was this standoff over the provision of security outside of Kabul that led to the creation of Provincial Reconstruction Teams at the initiative of Coalition commanders on the ground who perceived the danger of the security vacuum outside of Kabul. These small teams would not have a mandate to provide security to Afghans, as ISAF did in Kabul, but to provide assistance in order to win the allegiance of the local population. They were initially conceived of as part of the clean-up of Taliban “remnants” rather than as aid to a state building program. The attempt to “securitize” assistance met with very limited success. The change of the PRT mandate to support the state building occurred gradually over the next several years.

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1 There was 1 technical issue. Because the UN did not wish to recognize and make permanent the unrepresentative groups that participated in the Bonn Talks, the Bonn Agreement was signed by participants in the talks in their personal capacity. It was not an agreement among the 4 groups signed by their representatives. Fahim therefore claimed that as he was not among the signatories, and the Northern Alliance was not a party to the agreement, the agreement did not apply to him.
ISAF was always to be only a transitional measure until irregular formations could be disbanded and new security forces created. The Bonn Agreement contained references to both of these. Resistance by Northern Alliance commanders made it impossible to mention disarmament and demobilization in the Agreement explicitly, but the text stated that “Upon the official transfer of power, all mujahidin, Afghan armed forces and armed groups in the country shall come under the command and control of the Interim Authority, and be reorganized according to the requirements of the new Afghan security and armed forces.” Annex 1 requested “the assistance of the international community in helping the new Afghan authorities in the establishment and training of new Afghan security and armed forces.”

For the first several years, the U.S.-led Coalition effectively prevented the enforcement of the first provision by paying for and creating auxiliary militias to fight alongside Coalition troops. While most (not all) of these militias were nominally part of the Afghan ministries of defense or interior, in practice they answered to their paymasters or to no one. The pursuit of the military strategy based on giving bags of cash to militias continued to undermine the state building agenda enshrined in the Bonn Agreement.

The U.S. immediately proposed that it organize a new Afghan National Army, which it saw as its partner in the War on Terror. Indeed, according to Afghan officials, through 2006 the ANA was organized more as an auxiliary force for the Coalition than as a genuine national army. General plans for the security sector were agreed at a G-8 meeting convened by Dobbins in a sidebar to the Tokyo Donors Conference in January 2002. Dobbins’s instructions from Washington, however, stated that while the U.S. would lead the effort to build the army (part of war fighting), it would not become involved in any “nation-building” activities such as police reform, counter-narcotics, judicial reform or DDR.

This position prevented the creation of a comprehensive and effective program of security sector reform. The Brahimi Report of 2000, for instance, recommended “a doctrinal shift in the use of civilian police and related rule of law elements in peace operations that emphasizes a team approach to upholding the rule of law and respect for human rights and helping communities coming out of a conflict to achieve national reconciliation; consolidation of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programmes into the assessed budgets of complex peace operations in their first phase.”

The U.S. refusal to participate in “nation-building” ruled out a coordinated team approach. The security measures were all funded by bilateral voluntary contributions rather than by an assessment that could be disbursed on the basis of coordinated priorities. Given his mandate, Dobbins, who soon resigned in frustration, settled on the “lead nation system,” which doled out the security tasks like political patronage, largely without regard for capacity. Germany, which has no national police force, was responsible for rebuilding the national police. Japan, whose constitution precluded it from
deploying any troops to Afghanistan, was responsible for demobilizing tens of thousands of hardened, undisciplined fighters. The Italy of Silvio Berlusconi was responsible for judicial reform. The lead donor system included no mechanism for coordination among the various components, despite the obvious points that police and judicial reform are interdependent, that it is impossible to engage in counter-narcotics without functioning police and courts, that it is impossible to build a “national army” without demobilizing non-national militias, and that it is impossible to hold free and fair elections or implement any other part of the Bonn Agreement without the security reforms that would make these actions meaningful.

The Department of Defense particularly opposed participation by the U.S. armed forces in the demobilization, disarmament and reintegration of the militias. For most of 2002 what Brahimi referred to as a “fatwa” from Secretary Rumsfeld to this effect was in force, despite the fact that only the Americans, who had paid for and mobilized these forces, could have brought to bear the leverage to demobilize them. By November 2002 it had become evident that the formation of the national army was inherently linked to the demobilization of the militias. Fahim’s Ministry of Defense had put forward proposals that would essentially have created the ANA out of rehatted mujahidin. As a result the U.S. Office of Military Cooperation, led by then Major-General (now Lieutenant-General) Karl Eikenberry, who later became the force commander, found it impossible to disentangle the 2 subjects. The fatwa was modified, and U.S. commanders were permitted to participate in the DDRr. steering committee that decided on policy. It was not until 2004, however, that faced with the prospect of holding a presidential election in a country controlled by militias that largely opposed the U.S.’s preferred candidate, DoD authorized the U.S. military to participate in the implementation of the DDRr. process.

By the time the policies changed, however, the Emergency Loya Jirga had already taken place under militia domination, which meant, as Brahimi later wrote, “the Emergency Loya Jirga in June 2002, was a disappointment to many in so far as it failed to improve significantly the ethnic and social balance inside the Government.” The UN and government consequently decided to structure the constitutional process in a manner that reduced the opportunities for militia and warlord domination but that therefore also limited public participation. A number of flaws in the constitution may be traced to the perceived impossibility of holding an open discussion under existing security conditions.

State building, of course, also involves building institutions of governance and making them sustainable through creation of an economic base to pay for them. The failure to strengthen the government against illegitimate competitors in the provision of coercion weakened the state’s fiscal and service delivery capacity. For most of the first 2 years, the central government was unable to gain control over the customs posts where most of the country’s revenue was collected. It was unable to gain control of the provincial banks through which it was supposed to pay salaries. While UNDP originally created a small fund to pay the salaries of government employees, very little if any assistance went to
build the capacity of the government. Instead aid organizations, along with the rest of the international presence, actually reduced the capacity of the government by creating their own parallel institutions for the delivery of assistance and hiring the most talented Afghans to work in these institutions, rather than the government, whose salaries could not compete.

It took a sustained effort by the Afghan government, especially Ashraf Ghani, who became minister of finance in June 2002, to convince the U.S. to lead the international community in a major effort to invest in the economic future of Afghanistan. Most of the initial pledges made at the Tokyo conference were spent on humanitarian assistance, especially the absorption and reintegration of over 2 million refugees who returned home in 2002.

In fact, the humanitarian aid, combined with the large amount of cash distributed by the CIA and others, had a very damaging effect on the economy and helped to promote the revival and expansion of opium poppy cultivation. Many of the returning refugees were fed with wheat donated by the U.S. under what used to be called the Food for Peace Program and distributed in Afghanistan by the World Food Program. As is well known, the distribution of wheat, the main food staple crop in Afghanistan, caused a fall in the price that farmers could earn for producing it. Providing cash for food is well understood to have much better economic effects, as it bolsters the demand for foodstuffs and hence supports the income of farmers as well as the consumption of those who need it. But it does not satisfy the political needs of the farm lobby in the U.S..

At the same time, commanders, traders, and money changers who were looking for a profitable outlet for all the dollars that had come into the country, were turning to investments in the production and trafficking of opium. The rapid expansion of poorly disciplined armed groups provided the infrastructure for the security of trafficking. These factors together with the deterioration in security explain the rise in drug trafficking. In time, the profits from trafficking combined with the rents that could be extracted by armed force to create a vicious circle reinforcing insecurity and illegality.

When discussing the impact of counter-narcotics policy, it is worth bearing in mind the many ways that the international community has carried out a pro-narcotics policy though unintentionally. First, the final demand for heroin is largely found in the developed countries though consumption of heroin and other opiates has grown rapidly in Pakistan, Iran, Central Asia and Afghanistan itself. Second, the empowerment of armed groups and the focus on building a military rather than the rule of law reinforced the lawless environment that discouraged licit investment. Third, international economic policies dumped free wheat on the Afghan market and failed to invest in productive infrastructure for the first several years.

Once the value of an illicit sector of the economy reaches a level comparable to one third of the
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whole, it is no longer meaningful to conceive of counter-narcotics as a law enforcement effort bolstered by some economic programs to compensate farmers who lose out though that is what international counter-narcotics efforts amount to. Farmers who have used the income from poppy to obtain a modicum of dignity and security for their families will resist efforts to deprive them of this income and return them to destitution. Afghans will move out of the narcotics production when there is sufficient security for them to withstand the threat of reprisals for non-payment of opium debts and when the infrastructure and policy environment are sufficiently encouraging that they can hope to gain decent livelihoods from licit activities.

International policy toward narcotic drugs is primarily driven by the counter-narcotic policies of wealthy consuming countries. While these countries played a major role in the invention and expansion of the trade in narcotics during the 20th century they elaborated a prohibitionist policy institutionalized in the Single Convention on Narcotic Drugs overseen by the International Narcotics Control Board. The primary international organization responsible for the implementation of the Convention is the UN Office on Drugs and Crime. Most states also have their own institutions for dealing with the enforcement of the prohibitions on the import, export, sale and use of illicit narcotics.

Together these various instruments of drug policy have established an international regime aiming at the elimination of the production, trade and consumption of outlawed narcotics. This regime is mainly oriented toward the treatment of narcotics as a law enforcement issue, as indicated by the fact that the international organization dealing with narcotics is UNODC, which treats it under the rubric of crime, rather than, say, WHO, which could deal with it under the a health problem or UNDP or the World Bank, which could deal with it as a development problem. Like other areas of policy, drug policy has developed its own stovepiped rules, norms, procedures and metrics for success. The metrics for success mainly depend on the amount of drugs produced, traded or consumed, measured in physical quantities (success equals less drugs). In this respect drug policy resembles other policy areas such as development, monetary management, human rights, humanitarian assistance and security, all of which have dedicated organizations, regimes, norms, procedures and metrics.

The increase of multilateral peace operations has sparked a debate about policy coherence. These operations include UN peacekeeping and peace building operations, hybrid operations in which the UN collaborates with regional actors, operations led by regional organizations and some carried out by multi-national coalitions. The need for coherence among the stovepiped agendas of the various international and bilateral agencies that participate in such operations led to the Brahimi report’s recommendation that the UN establish integrated missions, with political mediation, peacekeeping, humanitarian aid and reconstruction/development assistance operating under a single Special Representative of the Secretary-General. The report of the High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change went further, recommending the establishment of a high-level political body at UN
headquarters, the Peace Building Commission, supported by a Peace Building Support Office within the secretariat. The PBSO also has budgetary authority over a Peace Building Fund, which it can use to assure greater speed, coherence and coordination in peace building operations.

Counter-narcotics police supported by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency raided the office of the governor of a province where Taliban insurgents were active and confiscated several kilograms of opium gum. The same governor had been funded by the CIA to fight the Taliban and was being used by President Karzai in an attempt to maintain a balance among several tribes in the area. This event led to a clash among several agencies of the U.S. and Afghan governments.

In Helmand province, attempts at poppy eradication coincided with an acceleration of counter-insurgency efforts; the Taliban successfully exploited the economic resistance to eradication to strengthen their position. This resistance worsened the security situation to the point that aid workers responsible for alternative livelihood programs were unable to enter poppy-growing areas, as the local population prevented any official representatives from working there.

The narcotics economy also constitutes a substantial share of Afghanistan’s macro-economy. It provides employment, increasing effective demand; it brings foreign currency into the country, helping to balance the external accounts, and it finances imports and mobile telephone use, which are the 2 principal sources of government revenue. The creation of employment and economic activity are essential to the stabilization of any post-conflict country. Counter-narcotics policy, however, does not address how to compensate for the potentially destabilizing macroeconomic effects of abolishing a large sector of the economy.

But several points emerge from the analysis of the interaction between counter-narcotics and peace building in Afghanistan. Counter-narcotics policy uses metrics based on physical quantities of drugs to measure success. The effect of the production and trade in illicit narcotics on peace building, however, depends almost entirely not on the physical quantity of drugs but on the amount of drug money reaching corrupt officials and insurgents. Money going to cultivators does not have a similarly destabilizing effect. Each category of actors who might be made better or worse off by different counter-narcotics policies stands in a different relationship to the overall political effort. Roughly speaking, the international community and Afghan government want to ally with the cultivators, eliminate or neutralize the insurgents and offer corrupt officials and politicians within the government an opportunity to reform, combined with a threat of punishment. Different counter-narcotics instruments have different effects on the loyalties, incomes, and assets of these actors and hence have different political effects. Crop eradication, according to an analysis by the World Bank, increases the farmgate price, thereby lowering the income of poorer farmers (who cannot afford to pay bribes) in accessible areas (where eradication is carried out). The rise in prices enriches all those who hold stocks
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of opium, mainly traffickers.

Interdiction has a different effect: it targets the income and assets of traffickers. Targeting refineries and heroin stocks destroys even more value without directly reducing the income of identifiable or geographically concentrated (and hence mobilizable) groups of farmers. Alternative livelihood programs benefits the farmers while forcing traffickers to offer higher farmgate prices, lowering their profit margin. The use of different metrics for success (physical quantity versus value of the opium economy) could lead to a different mix of instruments.

Similarly, different counter-narcotics instruments would have different effects on the balance of payments, effective demand and employment, all of which also affect prospects for peace and stability. Yet neither the microeconomic analysis of the effect of different counter-narcotics strategies on the political interests and capacities of different actors nor the macroeconomic analysis of the impact of counter-narcotics on the entire economy is taken into account in planning counter-narcotics strategy.

Integrating counter-narcotics policies into peace building operations requires analysis of the short-term and long-term impact of different mixes of counter-narcotics instruments not only, or even mainly, on the amount of illicit narcotics available for world wide consumption, but of the impact of different instruments on peace, stability and development. Just as aid organizations have begun to develop conflict-impact assessments of their humanitarian and development aid, counter-narcotics organizations need to develop conflict-impact assessments of their various policies and instruments.

Development of such an analysis requires a shift in mentality and models on the part of the organizations that make up the counter-narcotics regime. Though the World Bank and IMF are prohibited by their statutes from introducing political considerations into their lending and other operations, they are being forced to recognize that political risk and impact on conflict result in part from the distributive and political impact of their policies, especially in a fragile post-conflict environment. Hence rules about balancing budgets and eschewing taxes on international trade, for instance, may need to be relaxed for a period of time, as may the usual prohibition on using international aid for recurrent expenditures. In order to be consistent with the over-riding goal of human security through peace building, counter-narcotics doctrines may similarly have to be modified in post-conflict cases. By no means does this mean that tolerating illegal drugs is the path to peace and stability. Ignoring the growth of an illicit economy, as the U.S. and much of the international community largely did in the first couple of years in Afghanistan, can fuel corruption, insecurity and bad governance. The challenge is to find the right mix of instruments so that counter-narcotics reinforces the overall peace building effort.

Adapting counter-narcotics policies to post-conflict peace building or conflict prevention may
require some rethinking of the international regime on narcotic drugs. The international drug control regime, which criminalizes narcotics, does not reduce drug use, but it does produce huge profits for criminals and the armed groups and corrupt officials who protect them. Our drug policy grants huge subsidies to our enemies. As long as we maintain our ideological commitment to a policy that funds our enemies, however, the second-best option in Afghanistan is to treat narcotics as a security and development issue. The total export value of opiates produced in Afghanistan has ranged in recent years from 30 to 50% of the legal economy. Such an industry cannot be abolished by law enforcement. The immediate priorities are massive rural development in both poppy-growing and non-poppy-growing areas, including roads and cold storage to make other products marketable; programs for employment creation through rural industries and thoroughgoing reform of the ministry of the interior and other government agencies to root out the major figures involved with narcotics, regardless of political or family connections.

Finally we come to the very nature and structure of the Afghan state itself, and its relation to the international system. Afghanistan formed with its current boundaries and centralized administration as a buffer state within the sphere of influence of British India. This history explains a paradox that has puzzled many observers; a country that needs decentralized governance to provide services to its scattered population has one of the world’s most centralized administrations. But Afghanistan’s state in its present form developed not to provide security and services to its people, but to enable an elite subsidized by foreign aid to control the territory to protect the security of neighboring empires and states in South Asia, the Persian Gulf/Middle East, and Central Asia/Eurasia. The neglected needs of the people of Afghanistan for human security and basic services have left them vulnerable to recruitment to the armies and militias that have fought these struggles.

For centuries the territory of today’s Afghanistan, especially the barren lands south of the Hindu Kush, has been unable to sustain a state from their own resources. The people of these lands do not produce enough to pay the cost of their own security, faced with the coercive technologies of the modern state. The one resource the highland nomads of this area still had was pasture for horses, the mobile armor of the pre-industrial world. When European empires weakened the empires of Safavid Persia and Mughal India, Afghan cavalry commanders established short-lived conquest empires that are the ancestors of the Afghan state. In 1721, Mirwais Hotaki, a member of the same Qandahari tribe as Mullah Muhammad Umar, overthrew the Shi’a governor of Qandahar and sacked Isfahan, capital of the Safavid Shi’a state. Mirwais was succeeded in Isfahan by a Turkmen commander, Nadir Shah Afshar, whose cavalry was commanded by Ahmad Shah Abdali (latter Durrani), a member of the same Qandahari tribe as Hamid Karzai. In 1747, Ahmad Shah retreated to Qandahar with Nadir Shah’s treasury after the latter’s assassination and became king of the Afghans. He set off to raid the irrigated lands of Kashmir and Punjab.
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What these empires had in common is that their resource base consisted of raiding and predation outside the home areas of their ruling elite. They established a state to redistribute the fruits of conquest to that elite while providing justice through shari’a courts in the towns. But the advance of the imperial powers that had weakened Afghanistan’s neighbors soon brought an end to the imperial ventures of Afghanistan as well. The political and legal structure of the region started to assume its contemporary form in the early 19th century, when the British East India Company was expanding toward northwest India.

The expansion of the British and Russian empires put an end to the option of conquest and external predation, throwing Afghanistan into turmoil for much of the 19th century. As the British Empire moved northwest toward Central Asia, Delhi tried various options to stabilize the border with Russia. The forward policy failed in the first Anglo-Afghan War (1839 – 1842), during which the British tried to occupy Afghanistan directly and rule the country indirectly through an appointed monarch, Shah Shuja. After the Second Anglo-Afghan War, however, Afghanistan became stabilized as a buffer state between the Russian and British empires. The British and Russians arrived at a three-tiered border settlement, set forth in the 1879 Treaty of Gandamak between Afghanistan and Great Britain, the 1893 Treaty on the Durand Line that demarcated the limit of the Afghan administration, and the 1905 Anglo-Russian Agreement on Persia, Afghanistan and Tibet. Afghan governments have always regarded this settlement as imposed on them and never accepted its legitimacy.

Under these agreements the border between the 2 empires was a border of separation, not of contact. The first frontier was the line separating the areas of India under direct British administration from areas under Pashtun tribal control. Today this is the line within Pakistan separating the Northwest Frontier Province and Baluchistan from the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. The second frontier was the Durand Line, separating the tribal territories from the area under the administration of the Amir of Afghanistan. This is the line that Pakistan and the rest of the international community consider to be the international border but that Afghanistan has never accepted as such. The areas under the control of Kabul, the territory of today’s state of Afghanistan, were stabilized through British aid to the Amir, mainly to build up his army. Britain controlled Afghanistan’s foreign relations, assuring that neither Russia nor any other force hostile to the British Empire would enter the area. Hence the outer border of Afghanistan, the country’s “hard” or closed borders with Iran, Russia, and China, constituted the security border of the British Empire and insulated South Asia from neighboring regions.

The weakening and dissolution of both the British and Russian/Soviet empires during the 21th century eroded this security arrangement in the borderland. The weakening of the British Empire through the Great War and the growth of the freedom movement in India, led to the Third Anglo-Afghan War in 1919, which concluded with the recognition of Afghanistan’s full sovereignty; the country eventually joined the League of Nations and was a founding member of the United Nations.
King Amanullah (1919 – 1929) attempted a more assertive nationalist and anti-colonialist policy based on internal development, but the effort collapsed in internal revolts for lack of resources. The British helped another contender, Nadir Shah (father of Zahir Shah, the former king who today is officially “Father of the Nation”) to consolidate rule there while the Soviet border remained closed, and interests in Iran were shared between Britain and the USSR.

The independence and two-stage partition of India, leading to the formation of Pakistan in 1947 and Bangladesh in 1971, changed the strategic stakes in the region and determined how it was integrated into a world dominated by the Cold War Alliance systems. Afghanistan claimed that Pakistan was a new state, not a successor to India, and that all treaties, including those regarding the frontier, had lapsed; it called for the self-determination of the people of the tribal territories or Pashtunistan. Skirmishing across the Durand Line began with the covert support of both governments.

Afghanistan remained a de facto buffer state pursuing a policy of non-alignment. Its governments sought equidistance between Cold War competitors, both of which provided aid to different parts of the state. But the dispute with Pakistan, which chose alliance with the U.S. in order to balance India, forced Kabul to rely on aid from Moscow to train and supply the army. Pakistan came to regard Afghanistan as part of a Delhi-Kabul-Moscow axis that challenged its legitimacy as a state, or, as Israel says, its “right to exist.”

The partition of Pakistan in 1971 left its remainder far more exposed. Islamabad responded by forming a strategic alliance with Saudi Arabia under U.S. sponsorship, launching a nuclear program, and developing its capacity for covert asymmetrical warfare, a tool it used with U.S. direct support against the USSR in Afghanistan and against India in Kashmir. Pakistan’s military thus sought a strategic identity of Islamic anti-communism, expressing the domestic alliance of the military and the Islamists against the mainstream parties that dominated elections and the international alliance and military supply relationship with Washington. This orientation became more challenging to maintain after the Cold War and, especially after September 11, 2001.

The inflow of capital to the Persian Gulf after the 1973 oil shock enabled the Shah of Iran, operating under the Nixon doctrine to try to draw Afghanistan away from the USSR while Pakistan was also preparing Islamist guerrillas to counter the nationalist government in Kabul. The collapse of Afghanistan’s ruling dynasty (anti-monarchical coup in 1973, overthrow of the President, the former King’s cousin in 1978) and its replacement by communists allied to Moscow, shattered cooperative relations in the borderland.

The first round of Afghanistan’s Thirty Years War (so far) seemed to end with the Geneva Accords of April 14th, 1988, which provided for the withdrawal of all Soviet troops, the end of military
assistance to the mujahidin who had fought them, the return of refugees, and great-power guarantees. The war continued, however, in the absence of great-power agreement over the political settlement in this borderland between the Soviet Union and the Western alliance system. The Geneva Accords allowed the USSR to continue to aid the regime it had installed while the U.S. and Pakistan would cease arming the resistance. The result would have been a weak, Afghanized government, still close to the USSR, but without a Soviet deployment. In effect, Afghanistan would have returned to its status as a de facto buffer, but within the Soviet sphere of influence. The U.S. and Pakistan, however, dedicated to an anti-Soviet “rollback” policy (equivalent to the British “forward policy”), insisted on wiping out Soviet influence in Afghanistan, which assured continuation of war, and eventually state collapse. The U.S. and its allies thought for years that the collapse of Afghanistan, once again into warring chiefdoms allied with neighboring states, movements and other networks, was not a global strategic issue. Not until September 11 did they heed warnings that, in the absence of a minimally effective state to insulate the borderlands, a global terrorist opposition was consolidating its links and building its skills, using the human and physical capital supplied to these networks by the U.S., Saudi Arabia and others through Pakistan in pursuit of the Cold War strategic agenda.

The shattering of the border settlement and the collapse of the insulator state between Eurasia and South Asia took on greater importance because of the increased strategic importance of the Persian Gulf and Central Asia in an age of rising energy costs and nuclear competition within South Asia itself. The lack of human security of the people of Afghanistan directly facilitated the use of the country’s territory by al-Qa’ida and others to threaten the security of others. The lack of human security guaranteed by legitimate and capable political arrangements deprived the Afghan people of a genuine stake in the international system or a means to participate in it. This in turn deprived international actors of effective tools of communication and leverage with the de facto authorities in the country, including mujahidin and militia commanders and the Taliban.

Throughout the period of warfare since 1978 and earlier, when Pakistan started providing refuge and aid to Afghan Islamists, Pakistan’s military has treated the various wars in and around Afghanistan as a function of its national security and institutional interest: balancing India, a country over 8 times its size in population and economic resources, and whose elites, at least in Pakistani perceptions, do not fully accept the legitimacy of the existence of Pakistan, neutralizing the nationalism of cross-border peoples (Pashtun and Baluch), and strengthening its domestic Islamist allies to wage asymmetrical warfare on Afghanistan and India to extend influence into Central Asia, and to counter the electoral majorities of opponents of military rule with the street power and militias of the Islamists. Pakistan’s essential strategy consisted of maintaining as much of a conventional balance with India as possible, building up unconventional forces for asymmetrical warfare (essentially jihadi forces for Afghanistan and Kashmir) in order to tie down conventional armies on its borders and to assure that no pro-Indian groups could approach Pakistan from the west, ultimately shielding both with a nuclear deterrent.
Pakistan’s goal in Afghanistan has been to bring the country under its influence or hegemony by supporting Pashtun Islamists against nationalists to preclude any Indian influence there. Pakistan would then benefit from “strategic depth” and a secure border. Pakistan has seen the core of the Northern Alliance, Massoud’s Panjsheri-led Supervisory Council of the North, as penetrated by Indian intelligence. Some in Pakistan also dreamed of uniting the 2 countries under Islamabad’s suzerainty and eventually joining with Central Asia. Pakistan outsourced the training and funding of parts of its Afghan and Kashmir adventures to al-Qa’ida.

The Taliban show to what extent the mass violence, migrations, and ideological mobilization of the past 3 decades have transformed the border region. The Taliban are neither a purely Afghan phenomenon as Pakistan claims, nor a group based solely in Pakistan as the Afghan government claims. They are a phenomenon of the borderland, a joint Afghan-Pakistan network and organization, now increasingly integrated with the global networks of al-Qaida. Afghan refugees, their children and their grandchildren have coped with and interpreted their experiences in the refugee camps, tribal territories and urban slums of Pakistan through the lens of the Islamist education that Pakistan’s military regime and its Saudi patrons offered them. The porous border and the ungoverned frontier between the 2 countries provided the space in which Pakistan could use the resulting social networks for the asymmetrical warfare that served its strategic purpose on both fronts (Afghanistan and Kashmir) while sheltering itself from conventional reprisal through nuclear deterrence. The instability of this arrangement has thrice threatened nuclear escalation, once over the 1999 Pakistani offensive in Kargil, Kashmir, again when the U.S. issued an ultimatum to Pakistan after September 11, and then over the 2002 attack on the Indian parliament by a Pakistan-based terrorist group.

The hurried negotiations between the U.S. and Pakistan in the immediate aftermath of September 11 changed Pakistan’s behavior, but not its interests. Support for the Taliban was so important to Pakistan that General Musharraf considered going to war with the U.S. rather than abandoning it. Pakistan first asked for a pause to allow it to install a “moderate Taliban” government that would hand over the al-Qaida leaders. When that failed, it demanded that the Northern Alliance, which it saw as backed by India, as well as Russia and Iran, not be allowed to enter Kabul or form the government. The agreement by the U.S. to dilute NA control with remnants of Afghanistan’s royal regime did little to mollify the generals in Islamabad, to say nothing of the majors and colonels in Waziristan and Baluchistan. Nonetheless, in order to save its nuclear deterrent and prevent the U.S. from allying with India, Islamabad acquiesced in reining in its use of asymmetrical warfare, in return for safe evacuation of hundreds of Pakistan officers and intelligence agents from Afghanistan. The U.S., wrongly convinced that it had already won in Afghanistan, turned a blind eye to Pakistan’s quiet reconstitution of the Taliban as long as Islamabad appeared to cooperate in providing basing rights, the search for the leaders of al-Qa’ida, and shutting down the nuclear proliferation network run, allegedly, by Abdul Qadir Khan.
The presence of U.S. and, eventually, NATO in Afghanistan acted as a deterrent against both overt external subversion and open warfare among the various powerholders who had been rearmed by the U.S. in the war to oust the Taliban. This deterrent would have created a window of opportunity to build an Afghan state that could be reintegrated into the regions on which it borders. Given the movements of capital, trade, population, arms, ideologies and identities, however, it was no longer possible for Afghanistan to play the role of a buffer state separating South Asia, Central Asia and the Persian Gulf region. Instead, Afghanistan would have to become what its new government calls a “land bridge,” integrating these areas.

The condition for the stabilization of Afghanistan under these conditions has been the formation of an Afghan state that enjoyed sufficient resources and legitimacy to control and develop its territory while developing a geopolitical identity that would pose no threat to any of its neighbors, and, most especially, to Pakistan, whose deep interpenetration of Afghan society and politics enables it to play the role of spoiler whenever it chooses. Such a project would have required additional troop deployments, especially in border provinces, and rapid investment in the infrastructure and development of the country. It would also have required both political reform and economic development in the tribal agencies of Pakistan, as advocated by, for instance, the Awami National Party, but such reforms would have deprived the military regime of resources for asymmetrical warfare.

Given the dependence of the Afghan state on international troops and aid, with the U.S. providing about half of each, stabilizing Afghanistan would also require a foreign policy by the U.S. that would make it and NATO into offshore balancers among the powers around Afghanistan. But the Bush administration’s policy of destabilizing the entire region from the Mediterranean to the Indus in the deluded belief that the U.S. could guide the resulting tsunami of bloodshed and rage toward pro-Western democracy has precluded such a policy.

The Bush administration’s reliance on Northern Alliance warlords put in power those whom Pakistan most mistrusted. Its opposition to “nation-building,” which it did not relax until 2003, led to delays in all such projects. The projects themselves, in the context of the U.S.’s deteriorating relations with Russia, China and Iran, also threatened rather than reassured Afghanistan’s neighbors. Afghanistan’s geopolitical situation has pushed it back toward closer relations with India, to which the U.S. has also become closer. The pursuit of a “war on terror” that looks more and more to Muslims like a war against Muslim empowerment has undermined the legitimacy of the foreign deterrent presence as the glacial pace of reconstruction has failed to offer an alternative base of support.

In this context, not only Pakistan, but other neighbors of Afghanistan as well, see the consolidation of a state dependent on the U.S. in Kabul and the construction by the U.S. of what appear to be 5 permanent military bases in Afghanistan as a long-term threat. The current Kabul government has
agreed to such a relationship, despite growing frustration with the U.S. over its failure to rein in Pakistan, hoping to become a close ally of the U.S. in the region in order to balance its neighbors. The Bush administration, however, is reluctant to take the steps necessary to rein in Pakistan for the sake of Afghanistan as it accords a higher priority to the Iraq-Iran theater. Most neighbors, lacking an alternative, still consider the disintegration of Afghanistan into warring chiefdoms or its reconquest by the Taliban, now more closely linked to al-Qaida, as a greater threat. Pakistan, facing an Afghan government which the military claims is penetrated by Indian intelligence, continues to host the command centers and support networks of the Taliban, which now have a free hand in Quetta and virtual control of several tribal agencies, notably North and South Waziristan, as well as much of the Afghan provinces directly across the border.

These transborder political and military networks are reinforced by the economic components of network war: trafficking in drugs, arms and other items. The weakness of the state and lack of security for licit economic activity is the context that encourages the growth of the drug trade, which rewards Afghanistan’s comparative advantage in the production of illegality. Smuggling is of course the classic livelihood of the borderland, and both of the major borderland ethnicities, Pashtuns and Baluch, owe much of their livelihood to it. Hence there are more Baluch and Pashtuns in the port city of Karachi than there are in, respectively Quetta or Kabul. The borderlands have already become a land bridge rather than a buffer for the criminal (drugs) and criminalized (transit trade) economies of the region. The transnational economic actors exploit the weakness and illegitimacy of the de jure structure of statehood in the region to pursue profit, part of which pays for protection provided by transnational and parallel military and political forces.

According to the classical or realist logic of the nation-state system, success or failure in the stabilization of Afghanistan depends on creating a sustainable state within the boundaries negotiated by imperial powers for other purposes. What resources a state needs to be secure depends on its threat environment: the weakness of domestic political legitimacy, regional disputes over control of the Afghan state and territory, and the proximity of global terrorist and narcotic networks create a threat environment that is now far more costly for Afghanistan to defend against than at any time in the past. The cost of the Afghan National Army, currently exceeding the total domestic revenues of the government, indicates the obstacles to creating a state and economy that can be self-sustaining.

The Afghanistan Compact and Afghanistan National Development Strategy aim to provide a framework for state building and the economic development needed to sustain it. Unlike the Bonn Agreement, the Afghanistan Compact constitutes an agreement between Afghanistan and the international community: the former will carry out the necessary policies, and the latter will supply necessary resources. These documents place equal weight on all the components of state building: security, governance and development. The ANDS proposes sectors in which the Afghan economy can
generate substantial growth.

For all that, no one has shown that even under the most positive scenario these strategies can produce a sufficient resource base to support a self-sustaining state in the current threat environment. Indeed, it seems unlikely. Yet accepting the disintegration of Afghanistan is out for the question for the international community.

It may be that international actors will be forced nonetheless to live with a situation they have not found the means to change. But there is another possibility, that for all its failings and insufficiencies, the experience in Afghanistan has started to develop modalities for new forms of global governance, what Ashraf Ghani calls the “co-production” of public goods and services by national states and international actors. Ghani cites the example of the European Union, where the richer members subsidize the poorer, and also transfer considerable wealth to the agricultural sector and programs for social protection, in recognition that regional security requires common positions on human security as well. Thus far it has proven to be a good bargain.

Afghanistan and places like it are capable of producing forces that threaten others – September 11 was the best example. In the past, weak states were simply defeated by or divided among their neighbors. If the international community is serious about the territorial integrity of the rather arbitrary set of 189 states that now exist, its collective security may require mechanisms such as exist in the European Union to assure that even the weakest and poorest have sufficient resources and capacity not to resort to violence and lawlessness. The current structures for governing and implementing aid were not built with this end in mind and tend to create dependence and clientelism rather than the partnership implicit in the concept of co-production. Structures such as the Afghanistan Compact, built on the Berlin declaration and the study, Securing Afghanistan’s Future that preceded it, may provide examples of more effective and equitable joint governance for our common welfare.