



# Time to Get Afghanistan Right

by Hekmat Karzai and Hyder Akbar



**AFTER SEVEN AND** a half years of international engagement, Afghanistan is at a very important turning point. The country faces a daunting set of challenges: a ruthless insurgency, comprised of militant groups with different capabilities and objectives; the government still struggles with corruption and delivery of basic services; the country produces 90% of the world's heroin, with the volatile province of Helmand producing half of the crop; and regional players are still involved and trying their utmost to influence Afghanistan's future.

On the other hand, the country has seen 9% growth in its economy for the last six years; has held presidential and parliamentary elections in which the majority of the eligible voters participated in the process; thousands of schools have re-opened; and health-care services now reach around 80% of the population. U.S. President Barack Obama has made Afghanistan one of his top foreign-policy priorities, which has led to an alignment of the United States' efforts from Iraq to Afghanistan. However, unless the indigenous capacity of the Af-

ghan people is developed in a timely fashion and regional players adopt a responsible policy stance toward Kabul, President Obama's Af-Pak strategy may not be enough to save Afghanistan.

## Mistakes of the Past

THERE ARE AT least 10 lessons we should learn from Afghanistan's recent experience.

- *Half-hearted support.* The international community did not provide Afghanistan the commitment that it deserved after the Sept. 11 attacks. Instead, there was a lackluster approach to everything, including the stability and development of the country. Mistakes were made which led to a decline in public support for the international intervention.

- *Lack of institution building.* From the outset, there was no interest in building Afghan institutions, so alliances were made with local commanders—the same

---

~ Mr. Karzai is the director and Mr. Akbar is the senior research analyst at the Centre for Conflict and Peace Studies in Kabul.

elements that fostered the emergence of the Taliban. Many of these commanders brought back to power by the West only empowered themselves and isolated the rest of the population.

- ✱ *Too few troops.* The light footprint was not appropriate since Afghans expected much more from their international partners. The West, on the other hand, was frightened that Afghanistan could become their “graveyard of empires.” Yet Afghans saw the international forces as peacekeepers rather than occupiers.

- ✱ *Too Kabul-centric.* The International Security Assistance Force, established by United Nations mandate, only operated in Kabul during the early phase of the transition, leaving a severe security vacuum that was rapidly filled by the commanders.

- ✱ *Poor enforcement.* The Disarmament Demobilization and Reintegration process was not taken seriously, even though there was a genuine effort by the Japanese who funded the program. Many commanders kept their heavy weapons and only turned in their old scrap.

- ✱ *See no evil.* Mafia-like structures were established, but everyone, including the international community, simply turned their heads the other way, which has led to corruption and the illicit drug trade spreading throughout the country.

- ✱ *Failure to reconcile.* The international community could not get its act together on reconciliation, even though there were several opportunities for dialogue with the opposition. Lakhdar Brahimi, the former special envoy of the U.N. secretary-general, states that this was the biggest mistake of his tenure.

- ✱ *Too easy on Islamabad.* The International Community and particularly the U.S. were deliberately blind toward Pakistan, while all along the terrorist sanctuaries and leadership straddled the Durand Line border. Two Taliban *shuras*, or councils, still operate from Pakistan and are

even known as the Quetta Shura and the Peshawar Shura.

- ✱ *Little financial support.* Afghanistan received an extremely low level of aid per capita. The U.S. and its allies put 25 times more money (and 50 times more troops), on a per capita basis, into postconflict Kosovo. There should have been a serious commitment to rebuild Afghan society and infrastructure.

- ✱ *Little inclusion.* There was a failure to understand the politics of development. Afghans were not put in the driver’s seat or even consulted on local projects. Instead, major foreign companies received the bulk of the funding and clearly failed to deliver.

- ✱ *In Baghdad’s shadow.* Iraq became a big distraction; most of the resources and key personnel from the U.S. were taken from Afghanistan and sent to Iraq.

## The Obama Plan

SOME U.S. OFFICIALS have described the conflict in Iraq as the war of choice and Afghanistan as the war of necessity. The facts on the ground prove this to be true. Al Qaeda was able to plan and finance the Sept. 11 attacks from Afghanistan. The Af-Pak region is also the original nesting ground for al Qaeda; it is where they established strong networks among themselves and where they built relations with local communities and certain state institutions. This region also has the kind of terrain and remoteness that makes it an ideal area for a group like al Qaeda to base itself. Although the U.S. has recently acknowledged the crucial importance of Afghanistan, the country had long been neglected by policy makers because of the war in Iraq. Afghans, meanwhile, had become hopeful about the international community’s engagement and looked forward to a partnership that would help bring stability to the country—instead, Afghanistan received international support that was inadequate to deal with

the challenges of a nation recovering from more than 20 years of conflict. Hopefulness soon transformed into disillusionment.

This change in attitude of Afghans was a reflection of events on the ground. The U.S. was winning in Afghanistan for the first two years and the country was in relative peace; the Taliban had disbanded and was no longer an organized fighting force. But avoiding the realities that were forming in Afghanistan changed the situation dramatically. The vacuum in those initial years when Afghanistan was written off as a success story provided an opportunity for the militants to recruit, regroup and rearm themselves across the Durand Line and to conduct attacks against the Coalition Forces and the Afghan government. With time and ample resources at their disposal, the militants are now putting up stiff resistance. The deteriorating situation in the country has reached a level that can no longer be ignored and Afghanistan once again sees itself at an important juncture. At this point, Afghans have welcomed the new Af-Pak strategy since it is seen as an attempt by the Americans to get things right.

The new Af-Pak strategy combines both Pakistan and Afghanistan as one policy unit. The Obama administration has realized that success in Afghanistan is not possible without dealing with the challenges of Pakistan, where militancy and extremism has taken root and where the rear-bases of many of the groups operating in Afghanistan are located. The main insurgent groups that are now fighting in Afghanistan—including the Taliban, the Haqqani Network, Hizb-i-Islami Gulbadin Hekmatyar (HIG), Tahreek-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and al Qaeda—are based out of Pakistan. Some of these groups are allegedly receiving support from official channels within the Pakistani establishment.

The central premise of President Obama's Af-Pak Strategy is to deliver a deathblow to al Qaeda and other militants,

and to make sure that both Afghanistan and Pakistan do not become safe havens for terrorists. This will only be achievable if Afghanistan and Pakistan cooperate with each other, especially on issues such as the increasingly volatile Af-Pak border, where the militants have a strong presence. Among Afghans and elements of the international community, there is increasing apprehension about state institutions in Pakistan and the role they play in regards to the militant safe-havens that exist within their country. The priority that the Obama administration has put on engaging Pakistan has been welcomed by Afghans as it indicates that U.S. policy makers understand the importance of this core issue.

Aside from the regional aspect of the new Af-Pak strategy, there is also an emphasis on developing institutions within Afghanistan to help stabilize the country. Building Afghan military and civilian capabilities is an important element of the new strategy. The emphasis on developing the security institutions of the country has been made clear by the Af-Pak plan and is vitally important to ensure long-term stability in Afghanistan; both the Afghans and the international community know that the presence of international forces in the country is neither sustainable nor ideal.

On the military front, there will be 4,000 extra troops to train the Afghan National Army and additional 17,000 troops to combat the militants, bringing the total number of U.S. troops to 68,000. These additional trainers will help the ANA grow into a much larger force—a boost from 70,000 troops to over 200,000 troops. The additional soldiers will be deployed to southern Afghanistan, which is the stronghold of the insurgents and has seen a serious spike in violence, as well as other areas where the insurgency has made strong inroads, mostly in the east and certain areas surrounding the strategic center of Kabul. The idea behind this “mini surge” is to

make sure the insurgents do not gain any more footholds in the populace.

The additional troops would also protect the populace from coalition air raids. So far in the conflict, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and the Coalition Forces have relied heavily on air assets to make up for their low number of troops on the ground. Many times, air bombardment has led to civilian casualties, which insurgents have used as “political oxygen” to recruit family and tribal associates of the deceased.

The military surge will be accompanied by a civilian one as well. President Obama has announced that there will be an increase in civilians—agricultural specialists, engineers and lawyers among others—sent to Afghanistan to help develop the country’s economy and increase the capabilities of the Afghan government to deliver basic services to the people. The strategy also includes the appointment of an inspector-general who will oversee the implementation of these projects—something that has been a serious issue these past few years due to allegations of corruption and wasted aid money. A focus on the civilian aspect of the situation in Afghanistan cannot be underestimated. The illicit drug trade, dire economic conditions and corruption within the Afghan government are seen as crucial factors contributing to the rising insurgency in Afghanistan. There will also be a greater focus on development efforts in Pakistan, including \$1.5 billion in development aid for the next five years.

Despite the potential of the Obama plan, some key challenges remain. There is a risk that “internationalizing” the efforts could have a negative impact on the new strategy. The surge of civilians in Afghanistan could undermine the Afghan government and

hurt the process of developing local capacity, something that will be needed for Afghanistan’s long-term future. In the last seven years, \$1.6 billion has been spent on technical assistance to help with development and other civilian efforts. This is a huge economic cost and it also shifts the focus from what is really needed—developing

local institutions to deal with the challenges directly. If the new civilian surge in Afghanistan is a continuation of this process, this could have dire consequences for improving the capabilities of the Afghan government.

*Afghanistan has been abandoned before only to resurface as a more serious issue—this time could be no different.*

On the regional front, challenges also exist. First, the U.S. will offer economic aid to Pakistan for the next five years, but there is no guarantee that the country will respond sincerely. Given the past money that has been spent on Pakistan and the results that have come of it, it is important this aid have enforceable conditions. Second, the NATO alliance in Afghanistan is a “patchwork of actors” and many of them do not share the U.S. objectives.

The obstacles we face in Afghanistan today are serious and ones that we cannot neglect or ignore. Many of the issues are a direct result of opportunities that were missed in the 2002-05 period when the current government was formed. Now the situation has taken a turn for the worse and those same issues that could have been dealt with easily will require more effort and commitment both from the Afghans and the international community. The road ahead is difficult but the alternative of continued instability and strife in this strategic geopolitical region is something that the international community cannot afford. Afghanistan has been abandoned before only to resurface as a much more challenging issue—this time could be no different. ■