

# REGIME CHANGE:

## *Lessons from Afghanistan*

*by Joe Lovoi*

One political satirist probably characterized it best when he parodied the impulsiveness of our foreign policy in a cartoon: "I sure hope Osama doesn't try anything else." "Osama? Snicker! That's so 2001." "Get with it, Sally—all the cool kids are worried about Saddam now..." And how true it is.

As America settles into its new position as global political wrecking ball and reconstruction firm all in one, it is important to consider the problems of regime change based on our most recent experience with the subject. The military operations in Afghanistan have been cited many times over as a tableau for how to incorporate regime change in Iraq. However it would be difficult to declare a clear victory after sifting through the results and finding that the country is neither peaceful nor secure, and that the functionality of Al-Qaeda, even in central Asia, remains dubious.

Based on how the US has carried out policies for geopolitical stability in the recent past, regime change appears to be a rather lightly investigated topic. In fact, the Bush administration's embracing of the term strikes a dissonant chord with its original foreign policy goals back in the distant pre-September 11 days. Just as his father had been, George W. Bush stood adamantly opposed to reconstructive commitments in other countries. When asked whether a US intervention to remove the Taliban from power would require a long-term US presence to rebuild Afghanistan, George W. Bush responded, "We are not into nation building; we are into justice."

However two years later, it appears that the president has overturned his family policy on long-term residencies in other countries. Seeing how unfinished business in Iraq has perhaps aggravated other US foreign policy goals in the region (though this remains entirely unclear), the administration has begun to consider long-term stability as a priority in the Middle East. There has been strong concern for regime change in Palestine as well as in Iraq, even going so far as to explicitly outline roadmaps to full rehabilitation. The State Department declares as its ongoing mission in Afghanistan: "We must provide resources and expertise to help the new human rights, judicial, and constitutional commissions lay the groundwork for a vibrant civil society, the rule of law, and accountable and transparent government." These policies hardly sound simple.

Since September 11, there has been a significant policy shift that favors pre-emptive action, which, by nature, obligates the US to rebuild the nations it chooses to strike. As Paul Reynolds of the BBC put it: "Nation building is the child of regime change." Curiously, the two are fundamentally joined at the hip because of the perilous implications that regime change carries for global political stability. In the post-Cold War world, global political stability is a complicated amoeba. At the risk of jeopardizing its interests and upsetting other alliances, we are now being forced to rethink what it means to be the only cop on the block.

Fortunately, based on its own history and priorities for overturning regimes, the US stands more to gain as a long-term strategist than as an occupier. US military capacity simply as a peacekeeping force and

civil reconstruction unit (as it stands today) does not even begin to approach the needs of a full-on reconstruction effort that the US will be required to undertake after toppling Saddam.

But significant questions remain from the last time regimes were changed as the war in Iraq promises to be the sister of the one in Afghanistan. There were some key failures on the part of the countries that pursued bringing down the Taliban that will resonate in the region for a very long time if they are not immediately addressed. We can all agree that the world will be a better place without Saddam Hussein—but how much better? It will be crucial that the US proceed with a much more well-thought out vision for how to topple a regime when it moves into Iraq than what it proposed to the poor people of Afghanistan.

I have identified three major problems with the ongoing military campaign in Afghanistan that present significant obstacles to the priorities of long-term stability and international security. Since the US-led campaign can be characterized mainly by its insufficiencies rather than its excesses, these problems are represented as policy failures. They are fundamental in their scope because of the relatively low cost of implementation and high potential returns to the US-led coalition. A re-examination of our long-term intervention policies based on our past mistakes would be extremely timely at this crossroads in the history of American hegemony.

### Reinventing the wheel: A failure to mobilize local trends

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of the US military campaign in Afghanistan is its decidedly isolationist operational policy. Ground forces navigate the difficult eastern provinces essentially cut off from the resources offered by the local population. In a region dominated by the Pashtu ethnicity, in which society dictates a strong chain of local intelligence gathering and the people are genealogically accountable to village authorities, dangerously few American intelligence sources are even slightly familiar with the socio-cultural terrain. To imagine the Americans' position in the region as adversarial to the culture completely ignores the great degree of sympathy and cooperation that the local population is willing to offer to the hunt for Al-Qaeda.

Conjecture as to the overall preparedness of our armed forces in this region comes directly from my first-hand observations of the effects of the military campaign in eastern Afghanistan. Sudden and overwhelming encounters with army and special forces raids have become regular installments in village life. The local population is usually left a bit baffled by all of this since they obviously don't have any objections to the Americans driving away the bandits and gangsters that have run wild in their country for so long.

But too much brutality could end up having negative effects on the War on Terror. People will soon tire of having their relatives and elected leaders mistakenly arrested in midnight raids—most of which result in the shooting deaths of innocent bystanders and people who try to flee or protect their livestock and property. Such a violent displacement of peaceful civilians will drive a wedge between the Afghans and the Americans they look to for protection. cursory military strikes can only lead to a tiresome, costly and ineffective presence in the region.

Without getting hung up on the details of cultural protocol, the US efforts to flush out Al-Qaeda and other international terrorists have been unsuccessful due in large part to the tremendous costs of reinventing the wheel. Poor local intelligence, multiple mis-strikes on civilian targets, and the aggravation of the local population by hasty and brutal raids have demonstrated a very superficial commitment to stabilizing the country. Although the Afghans and the Americans share a broad horizon of common values and political interests, the nature of the US military and reconstructive campaign has failed to acknowledge and mobilize local information.

There has also been a major policy failure to recognize and mobilize natural social trends that reaffirm national unity. As an independent observer of Afghani society, I was surprised by the overwhelming popular identification with an Afghani nationality. In every case where I asked Afghans to identify themselves, the response was uniform: "I am first an Afghan, second a Muslim, and third a Pashtu," one man explained. And this kind of prioritization of an Afghan identity was not confined to Kabul where the central government resides. People all across the eastern countryside where I surveyed poppy culture confessed to the same code of nationalism.

Cultural nostalgia for the unified and peaceful Afghanistan of the 1960s and 1970s prevailed across the board, whether I was posing the question to a professional Kabuli or a militia member from rural Nangahar province. Similar was the overwhelming desire for disarmament and the revocation of the gun culture that rules a stateless society, especially in the rural areas. In all of my estimation, the only obstacle to a full disarming of the population is the failure of the international forces to offer any security outside of the limits of Kabul city.

All of these policy shortcomings can be characterized predominantly as informational problems. A great majority of in situ military and diplomatic operations lack local and cultural landmarks. A true policy analysis would find many low-cost options that take advantage of local resources that coincide with US policy objectives.

Consumer confidence is down: A failure to commit sufficient funds

While \$5.25 billion has been pledged internationally toward reconstruction over the next 3 years, nearly all post-conflict redevelopment experts agree that this is wholly inadequate. Relative to other post-conflict settings during the 1990s, this figure is by far the lowest in comparison to Rwanda, East Timor and the Balkans, all having received four to seven times the amount of reconstruction aid.

As in any post-conflict situation, and especially in Afghanistan because of the severe deficit of the de facto government, preliminary commitments should be 1) to provide security and 2) to restore communication. In Afghanistan this would dictate an immediate expansion of the International Security Assistance

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Force (ISAF) to the other major cities and the highways that link them, and the beginning of a massive reconstruction of the civil transportation infrastructure.

However, in the real world of aid disbursement, such short and medium-range goals are misunderstood as being incongruent to immediate post-conflict reconstruction. Emergency food and shelter take immediate and disproportionate priority over infrastructure, due in large part to the emotional knee-jerks that are commonly associated with the humanitarian relief industry and the enormous discretionary cash flows that accompany them. A much more thoughtful and cost-effective response would address reconstruction as an exercise in wise development patterns and recognize the incredibly resilient and industrious nature of post-conflict populations.

The implementation of these crucial first steps toward sustainability is constrained only by the relief

budgets. A serious international reconstructive effort should account for the development needs of the local population as well as their immediate physical needs. In the realm of security, this would require the EU and Turkey (which commands the ISAF) to re-evaluate their commitment of security forces and to prepare for an immediate expansion to the major cities of Mazar-e-Sherif, Jalalabad, Kandahar and Herat.

As the world power to have the greatest interest in greasing the wheels of industry, the US must immediately activate a highway renovation project. Reconnecting the major urban centers of Afghanistan, besides already being a stated policy priority, is truly fundamental to reopening channels of communication between the isolated regions as a means of strengthening the central government. Securing the movement of people and goods throughout the countryside would not only be essential to backing the new interim state, but would stand as a gracious (and not easily forgotten) gesture to the Afghani people who have endured unspeakable violence for so long.

Significant problems within the international development agencies have somehow resulted in a floundering relief budget and a penniless interim government for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. It is difficult to say whether the concepts of wise sustainable development are widely understood throughout the international donor community—enough, at least, to make an informed prediction about the state of the country ten years from now. Whether it is a mistrust of our methods of planning and relief disbursement or a continuing suspicion of corruption in the ranks, consumer confidence is down and no one is buying stability in Afghanistan these days. This is especially shameful when one considers how eager post-conflict people are to reconstruct their civil societies in extraordinary and meaningful ways.

### Putting the cart before the horse: A failure to understand our common interests

As the international donor community has been timid in approaching Afghanistan with much commitment, the playing field has become unfortunately rather interesting. With no obvious development strategy in mind, the INGO (international non-governmental organization) offices in Kabul stand idle while entrepreneurs and speculators scour the countryside for open-access resources that can be captured in the meantime. Like nearly all post-conflict areas, there exists ample opportunity to exploit profitable avenues for short-run, inefficient development.

The source of this "selling out" to poor planning and high-risk commercial ventures is a failure to understand the natural market impulses of a foreign society. Development schemes are not one-size-fits-all, and growth rates are not boundless. Privatization and the scramble to attract foreign direct investment is not a panacea since it does not accurately represent or promote the development of a free market economy. Fundamentally though, Afghanistan continues to be handled with kid gloves because it is only superficially understood as it is hyped to be: socially divided, regionally fractured, an ethnic powder keg. In short, hopeless.

To hold such a limited and obviously shallow opinion of a post-conflict society is an Orientalist assertion that contemporary political dialogue has cast over many parts of the world. The common misconception of Afghanistan as a wasted hellhole fails to account for the some 25 million people who continue to lead their lives there and who hold human aspirations to improve their situations. It ignores and negates those aspirations in favor of commercial pursuits and dehumanizing development policies that only serve to maintain the balance of agency between various profit and "non-profit" groups.

It is rather in our pursuit to better understand each other that we find extraordinary common ground, and therefore ways to improve our methods of assessing and attaining our individual goals. A failure to understand local priorities and how they coincide with international ones reaps highly inefficient results

that in turn fail to provide equitable solutions to all parties. Quick military action in Afghanistan without a clear long-term reconstruction strategy produces deficits in various social and economic activities that are fundamental to a healthy civil society.

A geopolitical arrangement that lines up local concerns with foreign policy objectives (i.e. stable free market economies, political democracy, and the protection of human rights) will maximize each individual's benefit to a point of cumulative and mutual satisfaction (i.e. geopolitical stability). Clearly the long-term costs associated with poverty and exploitation are far too great for anyone to bear. Political violence, collapsing markets and social injustice are simply physical manifestations of a failure to recognize and mobilize common values.

Looking back on Afghanistan—even as our mission is not yet complete in this region—we can realistically quantify specific policy failures. Our apparently weak understanding of nation building should be clear to us, not as a deterrent, but as a learning tool for how we choose to assert our role in future ambitions of regime change.

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  2. George W Bush. September 2001. White House press conference.
  3. US Department of State, Bureau of South Asian Affairs. Afghanistan Country Information. <http://www.state.gov/p/sa/ci/af/>
  4. For further reading, see Anderson, Ewan W.; Dupree, Nancy Hatch. 1990. The Cultural Basis of Afghan Nationalism. London ; New York : Pinter Publishers.
  5. CARE International in Afghanistan. Policy Brief. October 01 2002.
  6. Non-profit status is, in fact, a highly misleading label that in no way accounts for the various profit-seeking and rent-seeking activities practiced among those groups.