

4. Security and politics in Afghanistan: progress, problems and prospects

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I. Introduction

In August 2008 the outgoing European Union (EU) special representative for Afghanistan, Francesc Vendrell, stated that there was no coherent plan for the international community in Afghanistan.¹ Debates about the country's future take place against a backdrop of ever more confident insurgent attacks, slow political and economic progress and increasingly negative perceptions within the international community and among the Afghan people about the country's prospects. The international community and key international institutions operating in Afghanistan—the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the United Nations, the EU and the United States—have gone on record numerous times regarding the problems they are facing in the country. These have become particularly serious since 2006 when the strength and confidence of the Taliban-led insurgency increased significantly.² Now, even the most optimistic assessments acknowledge that the situation in Afghanistan will get worse before it gets better.³

Positive and negative assessments regarding Afghanistan's prospects have ebbed and flowed since the end of 2001, with each subsequent year being dubbed 'the critical year'. An examination of the short term (i.e. six months to a year) has tended to yield a more negative prognosis, compared to a longer-term perspective (meaning perhaps decades).

There is a perception of lack of progress within national capitals, the international media and the Afghan population itself. This, combined with the apparent resilience of the Taliban has resulted in an intensifying and public international debate about the need to change strategy. US President Barack Obama has made it clear that there will be a shift in the USA's

¹ Permanent Mission of Afghanistan to the United Nations, 'Ex-envoy attacks Afghan strategy', 10 Sep. 2008, <<http://www.afghanistan-un.org/2008/09/ex-envoy-attacks-afghan-strategy/>>.

² E.g. de Hoop Scheffer, J., 'Afghanistan: we can do better', *Washington Post*, 18 Jan. 2009; United Nations, General Assembly, 'The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security', Report of the Secretary-General, A/63/372-S/2008/617, 23 Sep. 2008, p. 2; and Salahuddin, S., 'Security, governance biggest Afghan problems: Solana', Reuters, 21 Apr 2008, <<http://ca.reuters.com/article/domesticNews/idCAISL16079420080421>>. UN documents are available from <<http://documents.un.org/>>.

³ E.g. Gall, C., 'Insurgents in Afghanistan are gaining, Petraeus says', *New York Times*, 1 Oct. 2008.

approach, with less emphasis on military solutions and more emphasis on 'regional' and inclusive political, developmental and diplomatic approaches.⁴ However, this shift seems at odds with the USA's intention to deploy new combat troops to Afghanistan over the next two years.⁵ As the USA prepares for a greater military effort, other NATO member countries look increasingly reluctant to contribute more combat troops.

This chapter examines Afghanistan's condition and prospects. Section II provides a brief overview of the developments since 2001. Section III assesses the main political and security issues affecting Afghanistan in early 2009. Section IV reviews the role of, and particularly the difficulties faced by, some of the key international institutions operating in Afghanistan. Section V concludes with a look at likely prospects for Afghanistan over the next few years.

II. Background

The invasion and its aftermath

Following the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the USA, the US Government identified Osama bin Laden and the al-Qaeda network as being responsible. At the time, bin Laden was based in Afghanistan, where the continuous instability caused by an 11-year civil war and the shelter afforded by the Taliban provided him with a safe haven for the planning, training and launching of terrorist activities.⁶ After the repeated refusal of the Taliban regime to surrender bin Laden, a US-led military coalition, sanctioned by the UN Security Council, attacked the Taliban regime on 7 October 2001.⁷ The Taliban's conventional military capability collapsed rapidly under the weight of US air power, special forces and indigenous Afghan anti-Taliban fighters.⁸

The international community responded to the unexpectedly swift fall of the Taliban with political and military initiatives. In late November 2001 a UN-sponsored conference in Bonn, Germany, brought together most of the key Afghan ethnic and tribal leaders and resulted in a plan for Afghanistan's future known as the Bonn Agreement.⁹ The agreement provided a

⁴ Hechtkopf, K., 'Text: Obama's plan for Afghanistan and Pakistan', CBS News, 27 Mar. 2009, <<http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2009/03/27/politics/politicalhotsheet/entry4896758.shtml>>.

⁵ 'Obama OKs 17,000 new troops for Afghanistan', MSNBC, 17 Feb. 2009, <<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/29242187/>>.

⁶ Rashid, A., *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia* (Viking: London, 2008).

⁷ UN Security Council Resolution 1368, 12 Sep. 2001.

⁸ Seybolt, T. B., 'Major armed conflicts', *SIPRI Yearbook 2002: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2002), pp. 40–42.

⁹ Key groups included the Northern Alliance, the Rome Group (representing the ethnic Pashtun population), a Cyprus-based group supported by Iran and a Peshawar-based group supported by

political framework for the implementation of a democratically based political system with provisions for a new constitution and presidential and parliamentary elections.¹⁰

The international military response was equally rapid: the multinational ISAF was approved by the UN Security Council on 20 December 2001, and ISAF troops under British command arrived in Kabul two days later.¹¹ With a force of 3000 soldiers, ISAF's initial role was to bring security and stability to Kabul while a new Afghan Government was established.¹² ISAF operated alongside the USA's Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which was deployed throughout southern and eastern Afghanistan.¹³

The humanitarian efforts of the international community intensified, with the provision of aid, advice, financial assistance, training, reconstruction and security, focusing first on Kabul and then on the rest of the country. The disarmament of warlords and militia groups was the first priority of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA).¹⁴ These efforts were augmented by ISAF-controlled provincial reconstruction teams (PRTs), composed of both civilian and military development, political and construction experts. These teams were intended to provide a visible and active international presence in selected provinces in support of the Afghan Government but have been only partially successful.¹⁵

As mandated by the Bonn Agreement, an interim Afghan Government was established. Although not without complications, a *loya jirga* approved the redrafted Afghanistan Constitution in January 2004 and Hamid Karzai was elected president in October 2004.¹⁶ Parliamentary elections were held

Pakistan. The Taliban's exclusion from the conference is now judged by many to have been a mistake. United Nations Regional Information Centre for Western Europe, 'Afghanistan: UN talks on Afghanistan, Bonn, 27 November–5 December 2001', Dec. 2001, <http://www.unric.org/html/german/talks_template.htm>; and Johnson, T., 'Afghanistan's post-Taliban transition', *Central Asian Survey*, Mar–June 2006, p. 2.

¹⁰ United Nations, Security Council, Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions, S/2001/1154, 5 Dec. 2001; and Maley, W., *Rescuing Afghanistan* (C. Hurst and Co: London, 2006), pp. 31–32.

¹¹ ISAF is mandated under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (peace enforcement) by UN Security resolutions 1386 (20 Dec. 2001), 1413 (23 May 2002), 1444 (27 Nov. 2002), 1510 (13 Oct. 2003), 1563 (17 Sep. 2004), 1623 (13 Sep. 2005), 1659 (15 Feb. 2006) and 1707 (12 Sep. 2006). It exists in accordance with the Bonn Agreement of 6 Dec. 2001. More than 50 000 troops make up ISAF, with contributions from 41 states, and its area of operations covers the whole of Afghanistan. See appendix 3A, table 3A.2, in this volume.

¹² Seybolt (note 8), p. 44.

¹³ On the cost of the US operations in Afghanistan since 2001 see chapter 5, section III, in this volume.

¹⁴ See the UNAMA website, <<http://www.unama-afg.org>>.

¹⁵ PRTs have formed part of ISAF since Oct. 2006. On the composition, command structure and mandate of PRTs in Afghanistan see US Agency for International Development (USAID), 'Provincial reconstruction teams', Fact sheet, <<http://afghanistan.usaid.gov/en/Page.PRT.aspx>>.

¹⁶ On the *loya jirga*, a type of political forum unique to Afghanistan, see 'What is a Loya Jirga?', BBC News, 1 July 2002, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/1782079.stm>>.

in September 2005, and in January 2006 the London Conference inaugurated a five-year Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS).¹⁷

However, maintaining progress in Afghanistan was soon to be complicated by several factors. The international community's political, military and financial focus was quickly drawn to Iraq following the USA's March 2003 invasion of that country, and for at least five years Afghanistan remained in the shadow of the bigger and bloodier conflict there.

From the beginning, the Afghan Government struggled with a range of problems: corruption caused in large part by a resilient narcotics industry, recalcitrant regional warlords resistant to disarmament, and interfering neighbours pursuing competing agendas. The nascent government was unable to effectively exert its influence across large parts of the country, the US military focused narrowly on counterterrorist operations and ISAF was slow to expand across the country. The reforms of the Afghan security sector (i.e. disarming militias, tackling narcotics, and establishing a capable army, police force and effective judicial system) proceeded hesitantly and with uneven results.¹⁸

Over a period of several years, due in large part to Pakistan's inability or unwillingness to confront their presence, the Taliban began to re-emerge from north-west Pakistan and re-establish themselves in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan that the government and the international community had failed to reach. British troops encountered strong and organized resistance in Helmand Province in southern Afghanistan in the summer of 2006, indicating the Taliban's effective return.¹⁹

The problems faced by the international community

The international community operates in a geographically, demographically, historically and politically complex environment and consequently faces a number of internal and external obstacles—in addition to security challenges—in providing assistance to Afghanistan. It is having to work in a context complicated by destruction, over decades, of Afghanistan's governmental, economic, transport and communications infrastructure and against the competing influence of neighbouring countries that do not share its goals. After seven years, international efforts in Afghanistan continue to be widely criticized by media, government, academic and Afghan

¹⁷ See the Afghan National Development Strategy website, <<http://www.andg.gov.af/>>.

¹⁸ US Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Securing, Stabilizing, and Reconstructing Afghanistan: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight*, GAO-07-801SP (GAO: Washington, DC, May 2007).

¹⁹ Tweedie, N., 'Troops use up ammo as war with Taliban claims 14th life', *Daily Telegraph*, 28 Aug. 2006.

circles alike as being fragmented, lacking in leadership, wasteful of resources and lacking cultural sensitivity.²⁰

The diversity and scale of the international community's involvement in Afghanistan provide their own challenges to its coordination and control. The Afghan Government works with approximately 60 countries contributing some form of assistance, 41 troop-contributing countries and hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The national political and military agendas of contributing states routinely dominate their efforts to assist Afghanistan. Donor's funds are often spent on projects approved by their own governments, and not necessarily those prioritized by the Afghan Government. At the strategic level, major Afghan or international military, political or development initiatives would be difficult without at least the tacit approval of the US Government.²¹ The rapid changes in personnel in all organizations also undermine coordination and control efforts: valuable experience is lost and lessons must be continually relearned. Overall, this creates an incoherent environment of differing expertise, experiences, capabilities, resources, agendas and expectations. Furthermore, it is hard to evaluate either the immediate effectiveness of all these individual strands of activity or the long-term return on investment and benefit for Afghanistan. It is also difficult to assess how much has been lost to corruption and inefficiency.²²

III. The situation in Afghanistan in early 2009

A renewed US engagement

A combination of casualties, cost, frustrations at the lack of progress and a growing recognition of the open-ended length of the conflict is generating significant war-weariness among many troop-contributing countries.²³ In academic, political, government and military forums, the debates focus on

²⁰ DeYoung, K., 'U.N.'s envoy to Afghanistan sees threats to progress', *Washington Post*, 29 Apr. 2008; International Crisis Group (ICG), *Afghanistan: The Need for International Resolve*, Asia Report no. 145 (ICG: Brussels, 6 Feb. 2008); Korski, D., *Afghanistan: Europe's Forgotten War* (European Council on Foreign Relations: London, 21 Jan. 2008); and 'Karzai critical of U.S. war in Afghanistan', United Press International, 26 Apr. 2008, <http://www.upi.com/Top_News/2008/04/26/Karzai-critical-of-US-war-in-Afghanistan/UPI-34911209230065/>.

²¹ Rashid (note 6), p. liii.

²² Cordesman, A., 'Analysing the Afghan-Pakistan war', Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) paper, working draft (CSIS: Washington, DC, 28 July 2008), <http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/080728_afghan_analysis.pdf>.

²³ 'Britons call for troop withdrawal', BBC News, 13 Nov. 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/7725228.stm>>; and 'Afghanistan mission becoming increasingly unpopular in Canada', South Asia News Agency, 27 Mar. 2009, <<http://www.sananews.com.pk/english/2009/03/27/afghanistan-mission-becoming-increasingly-unpopular-in-canada/>>. See also the compilation of opinion polls on the website of the Human Security Report Project's Afghanistan Conflict Monitor, <<http://www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/polls/>>.

the best way to 'fix' Afghanistan and are underscored by increasing concern that Afghanistan is in a downward spiral. It seems clear that the Obama Administration's policy review of the US approach to Afghanistan and the region—particularly Pakistan and Iran—has led to recognition that renewed political, military and development effort is essential. Increasing European reluctance, the apparent absence of strong leadership from other countries or international organizations, and the extensive array of US military and financial resources suggest strongly that US-led initiatives will dominate and drive international efforts to assist Afghanistan for the next few years. Exit strategy discussions within the international community—particularly the USA—focus increasingly on building up large Afghan national security forces.

The USA's goals in Afghanistan have ranged from the narrow—killing Osama bin Laden—via the dismantlement of the Taliban, to the broad—the creation of a democratic, self-sufficient and fully functional independent Afghan state. The White House, the Pentagon and the US Central Command have all recently conducted official reviews of US policy in Afghanistan.²⁴ Some areas of consensus seem to be emerging in the Obama Administration: the need to support a representative Afghan Government, to improve law and order, to increasingly encourage Afghan ownership of problems and solutions, to increase the size and capabilities of the Afghan Army and police forces, and to expand and prioritize developmental and diplomatic initiatives in the region.²⁵ However, discussions have been pragmatic, with the US Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, among others, talking quietly of limiting goals and focusing on what can be done in the next three to five years.²⁶ These newer goals seem to reflect a closer focus on preventing the Taliban from ruling the country and al-Qaeda from using Afghanistan as an operations base and less emphasis on creating stable and democratic government institutions. Critics are suggesting that 'victory' conditions are being rewritten to fit with reduced expectations as to what is achievable in Afghanistan.²⁷

A probable troop boost over the next two years may see 17 000–30 000 new soldiers—almost entirely US—deployed to Afghanistan.²⁸ These troops will probably be stationed in southern and eastern parts of the country. But it is unclear as yet whether these forces will be employed to proactively confront the Taliban, hold ground to enable civilian development efforts to

²⁴ Baxter, S. and Smith, M., 'Obama puts brake on Afghanistan surge', *Sunday Times*, 8 Feb. 2009.

²⁵ Hechtkopf (note 4).

²⁶ Bowman, T., 'Obama sets more modest goals for Afghanistan', National Public Radio, 6 Feb. 2009, <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=100279589>>.

²⁷ Gearan, A., '“Victory” in Afghanistan likely redefined', *Washington Times*, 29 Jan. 2009.

²⁸ Pidd, H., 'Obama commits 17,000 more US troops to Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 18 Feb. 2009.

take root, protect the election in the autumn of 2009, or train the Afghan police and army, or a combination of these tasks.

However, ISAF military activity on the ground is also undermined by the USA's often strained relationship with other NATO members. US commanders have criticized other allies for not being willing or able to effectively prosecute counter-insurgency.²⁹ Senior US officials have become increasingly unhappy at what they see as the reluctance of other NATO members to take their share of the burden of fighting. The USA has made repeated demands for more troop contributions.³⁰ However, the USA's commitment to deploy more soldiers in 2009 does not appear to have been matched by the international community.³¹ Indeed, the Canadian Government has announced that by 2011 it will have withdrawn all its combat troops, and Denmark and the Netherlands look likely to follow in a similar time frame.³²

The re-emergence of the Taliban

The insurgency represents the central challenge to the work of the international community and the Afghan Government and to any new strategic initiatives from the USA. The surge in Taliban activity that began in 2006 continued throughout 2008.³³ There were 31 per cent more violent security incidents in 2008 than in 2007 and 75 per cent more in January 2009 than in January 2008—an indicator of the poor prospects for 2009.³⁴ Large parts of southern and eastern Afghanistan remain, if not under direct Taliban control, then certainly outside the Afghan Government's and ISAF's influence.

Asymmetrical tactics—small-scale 'hit and run' attacks, intended to exhaust the militarily superior ISAF forces—remained the favoured approach of the Taliban insurgency groups in 2008. The number of suicide bomb attacks continued to increase and improvised explosive devices

²⁹ Speigel, P., 'Gates faults NATO force in southern Afghanistan', *Los Angeles Times*, 16 Jan. 2008.

³⁰ 'Nato allies must take more responsibility in Afghanistan, says US', *The Guardian*, 19 Feb. 2009.

³¹ Evans, M, and Charter, D., 'Barack Obama fails to win Nato troops he wants for Afghanistan', *The Times*, 4 Apr. 2009.

³² 'Harper says 2011 "end date" for Afghanistan mission', CBC News, 10 Sep. 2008, <<http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2008/09/10/harper-afghanistan.html>>; O'Dwyer, G., 'Denmark strengthens presence in Afghanistan', *Defense News*, 9 July 2008; and 'Dutch troops to leave Afghanistan from July 2010: minister', Agence France-Presse, 18 Dec. 2007, <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jNLvb_RNGHs8uYSogklOdanFKxkg>.

³³ United Nations (note 2), p. 2.

³⁴ United Nations, General Assembly, 'The situation in Afghanistan and its implications for international peace and security', Report of the Secretary-General, A/63/751-S/2009/135, 10 Mar. 2009, p. 5.

(IEDs) remained the biggest killer of international military forces.³⁵ The Taliban also improved their conventional attack capabilities: in July they killed nine US soldiers at a military base near the Pakistani border in Konar province and in August killed 10 French soldiers in a separate incident approximately 50 kilometres east of Kabul.³⁶ In the media and propaganda arena, the Taliban have continued to make progress in 2008, demonstrating a growing understanding of international concerns—such as civilian casualties, conflict longevity and troop reinforcement—and how best to exploit them.³⁷

Approaches to tackling the insurgency have been, and are likely to remain, contradictory. More US, and possibly other NATO, troops are being sent to confront the Taliban despite strong statements from the international community and the Afghan Government about the impossibility of a military solution and the need for a negotiated political solution.³⁸ Air power represents an important capability for a stretched military and yet its use is increasingly curtailed as the numbers of civilian casualties rise. Proposed short-term solutions, such as rearming and empowering militias, may have long-term negative implications and reduce the resources available to the police. There are also risks that the Afghan police may become nothing more than an extension of the army instead of a much needed community police force focused on maintaining local law and order.

Security sector reform

A key aspect of the international community's effort to rebuild Afghanistan is to reform the security sector. This was undertaken through the use of 'lead nations', each to give focused assistance (advice and funds) in a particular field: the disarmament of ex-combatants fell to the Japanese, military reform fell to the US, police reform to Germany, reform of the judiciary was supported by Italy and counter-narcotics by the United Kingdom. In a country where state structures and institutions have been traditionally weak, security sector reform (SSR) has been a daunting challenge, and progress has been slow and uneven. The 'lead nation' approach saw inconsistencies in effort, resources and coordination, and the performance

³⁵ In 2008, 294 international military deaths were recorded, 152 of these were from IED attacks (not including deaths from suicide bombs). Iraq Coalition Casualty Count, 'Operation Enduring Freedom: coalition military fatalities by year', iCasualties.org, <<http://icasualties.org/oef/>>.

³⁶ Rondeaux, C., 'Nine U.S. soldiers killed in firefight', *Washington Post*, 14 July 2008; and 'Afghan ambush kills French troops', BBC News, 19 Aug. 2008, <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/7569942.stm>>.

³⁷ International Crisis Group (ICG), *Taliban Propaganda: Winning the War of Words?*, Asia Report no. 158 (ICG: Brussels, 24 July 2008); and 'Taliban to Canada: leave Afghanistan or else', Agence France-Presse, 17 Aug. 2008, <http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5iaz69EJxmWHSMp5hGb9zujKF4_zA>.

³⁸ Lamb, C., 'War on Taliban cannot be won, says army chief', *Sunday Times*, 5 Oct. 2008.

of each of the five ‘pillars’ of SSR in Afghanistan—disarmament, military reform, police reform, judicial reform and counter-narcotics—has been criticized: according to one expert, ‘Should the political process fail in Afghanistan, the collective failure to prioritise security sector reform from the outset . . . will be seen to have been [a] significant factor’.³⁹

After some initially encouraging results, the disarmament processes for both ex-combatants and illegal groups struggled under the weight of exploitative warlords, the difficulty in verifying weapon destruction, a lack of enforcement power—and the will to enforce—and ready access to cheap weapons from neighbouring countries.⁴⁰ Although the Disbandment of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) process is still in theory active, limited progress—for the reasons cited above—was made in 2008 or is likely in 2009.

Most of the SSR successes are related to the development of the Afghan Ministry of Defence and the Afghan National Army (ANA), which continues to expand in size, confidence and capability. The ANA was initially intended to have around 80 000 troops, but by March 2009 its strength was approximately 90 000. A new ceiling of 134 000 troops was set in 2008 and there are suggestions that the USA may push for this figure to be further increased to 250 000, to give a total of 400 000 army and police personnel.⁴¹ However, there still remain problems with capability and resources—although the ANA is growing in size the US Government assessed that, by the middle of 2008, only 2 out of over 100 ANA combat units were fully combat capable.⁴²

The development of the Afghan National Police (ANP) lags much further behind that of the ANA; it remains inefficient, poorly trained, riddled with corruption and beset with low morale.⁴³ Plans to rebuild the police force (and the corresponding judicial reform efforts) are progressing only very slowly. Given the involvement of, currently, the European Union, Germany and the USA there are questions over how well coordinated the end result will be. The US Focused District Development approach—which trains, re-equips and redeploys the personnel of entire districts—emphasizes training the police to fight the Taliban rather than providing community

³⁹ Stapleton, B., ‘Disarming the militias: DDR and DIAG and the implications for peace-building’, Paper presented at the Swedish Afghan Committee conference, 6–7 Nov. 2008, <<http://www.sak.se/arkiv/artiklar/artiklar/2009/peace/>>.

⁴⁰ Stapleton (note 39).

⁴¹ Shanker, T. and Schmitt, E., ‘U.S. plans vastly expanded Afghan Security Force’ *New York Times*, 18 Mar. 2009.

⁴² US Government Accountability Office (GAO), *Afghanistan Security: Further Congressional Action May Be Needed to Ensure Completion of a Detailed Plan to Develop and Sustain Capable Afghan National Security Forces*, GAO-08-661 (GAO: Washington, DC, June 2008), pp. 3–4.

⁴³ International Crisis Group, *Policing in Afghanistan: Still Searching for a Strategy*, Asia Briefing no. 85 (ICG: Brussels, 18 Dec. 2008).

policing skills.⁴⁴ It also dominates all other efforts to train police on the ground through sheer size of resources.

The Italian Government's assistance in reforming Afghanistan's judicial system is generally recognized to have been weak and lacking in impact.⁴⁵ A UN report from September 2008 highlights these difficulties clearly:

the Supreme Court, the Office of the Attorney General, and the Ministry of Justice suffer from a chronic lack of resources, inadequate infrastructure and a shortage of qualified, experienced, educated and trained judges and prosecutors . . . Corruption and intimidation by officials remain common. Effective disciplinary and ethical oversight mechanisms providing due process are lacking.⁴⁶

Afghanistan's judicial system will still be weak in 2009, a function of limited professional capabilities, difficulties in recruitment and training, and widespread corruption. Links between the police and the judiciary will probably remain poor, given the low quality of both.

The narcotics industry continues to undermine security and governance in Afghanistan, even though there was a reported decrease of 19 per cent in opium poppy cultivation (but not in yield) in 2008 after several years of increase to an all-time peak in 2007. Of the 34 provinces in the country, the number declared poppy-free rose from 13 to 18. However, drops in production have been misleading in the past, often reflecting market forces and pricing, rather than representing an identifiable trend away from poppy production.⁴⁷ The Taliban have made efforts to present themselves as 'protectors' of poppy farmers and reports suggest that millions of dollars from this industry continue to make their way into the coffers of the Taliban.⁴⁸

The Afghan Government and the 2009 elections

Over the past seven years the Afghan Government has struggled to develop its own capacity and extend its governance across the country. Progress has been slow and fragile, and the government remains beset by allegations of

⁴⁴ Packer, G., 'Kilcullen on Afghanistan: "It's still winnable, but only just"', *New Yorker*, 14 Nov. 2008.

⁴⁵ Dreyer, V. M., *Retooling the Nation-building Strategy in Afghanistan* (US Army War College: Carlisle, PA, 28 Feb. 2006).

⁴⁶ United Nations (note 2).

⁴⁷ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 'The opium flood waters in Afghanistan have started to recede', UNODC 2008 Annual Opium Poppy Survey, Aug. 2008, <<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/crop-monitoring/index.html>>, p. 3.

⁴⁸ United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 'Drugs finance Taliban war machine, says UN drug tsar', Press release, 27 Nov. 2008, <<http://www.unodc.org/unodc/en/press/releases/2008-11-27.html>>.

corruption and incompetence.⁴⁹ There are frustrations and tensions—civilian casualties caused by ISAF air strikes have angered the population and government.⁵⁰ International community efforts have been criticized for hampering the development of Afghan institutions.⁵¹

As part of the debate about Afghanistan's lack of progress, President Karzai's own performance is coming under increased scrutiny and international support for him appears to be waning.⁵² Critics of Karzai claim that he has failed to tackle government corruption; supporters point to the scale of the problem in Afghanistan and the absence of any potential candidate with similar or comparable levels of Afghan support.⁵³

The 2009 elections will present a major challenge, as the security situation has worsened considerably since the first set of elections in 2004 and 2005. The USA has distanced itself from Karzai, raising the possibility that another candidate might be favoured. This would probably trigger accusations that the US is interfering in the democratic process. Either way, there will be uncertainty over election logistics, policies, candidates and results. Any new Afghan President will require time to build a team and come to terms with the numerous problems facing the country. A post-election political hiatus would hamper the workings of the Afghan Government and the efforts of the international community.

The neighbouring region

Afghanistan's progress continues to be adversely affected by disputes between other states being played out within Afghanistan. Pakistan worries about the influence of India on its western border, and Iran feels threatened by the large US military presence on its western and eastern borders. The USA is now clearly recognizing that Afghanistan cannot be managed in isolation, and that Iran and Pakistan—despite their concerns—must be engaged with more closely and more creatively in order to help develop Afghanistan.⁵⁴ This work will in part be facilitated by Richard Holbrooke, who has been appointed to the new position of US Special Representative

⁴⁹ Borger, J. and MacAskill, E., 'US will appoint Afghan "prime minister" to bypass Hamid Karzai', *The Guardian*, 22 Mar. 2009.

⁵⁰ 'Afghan cabinet demands review of international presence', Agence France-Presse, 25 Aug. 2008, <<http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5jFiv4QuETjNCwACuln-COn8fFrQ>>; and Boone, J., 'Karzai accuses US troops of killing civilians', *Financial Times*, 26 Jan. 2009.

⁵¹ Abrashi, F., 'Karzai says US, NATO created "parallel" government', *The Guardian*, 26 Nov. 2008.

⁵² Boone, J., 'Hamid Karzai: too nice, too weak—how the West's own man fell out of favour', *The Guardian*, 23 Mar. 2009.

⁵³ Jones, S., 'How to save Karzai', *Foreign Policy*, July 2008.

⁵⁴ Hechtkopf (note 4); and Inderfurth, K. and Dobbins, J., 'Ultimate exit strategy', *New York Times*, 26 Mar. 2009.

for Afghanistan and Pakistan. Engagement with Pakistan is likely to include strengthened trilateral dialogue between the USA, Pakistan and Afghanistan and increased financial aid for Pakistan's civil infrastructure and government processes.⁵⁵

Pakistan continues to pose the most immediate challenge to Afghanistan's development, suffering from a faltering economy, weak government and increasing fundamentalism.⁵⁶ There are numerous credible claims that there is still support for the Taliban within the Pakistani military and intelligence circles that helped to bring the Taliban to power in the 1990s.⁵⁷ Taliban insurgent groups continue to benefit from the shelter afforded in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Federally Administered Tribal Areas and are able to cross the border—which is difficult to seal and not recognized by Afghanistan—more or less at will. While the stepping down of Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf in August 2008 was cause for international optimism, the new civilian government's ability to deal with the numerous security problems looks weak.⁵⁸

A ceasefire in February 2009 agreed between the Pakistani Government and insurgents in the Swat Valley, NWFP, involved the government's release of Taliban prisoners, the reduction of the Pakistani military presence in the valley and return to a Taliban-defined version of sharia law.⁵⁹ Such trends suggest that Pakistan will continue to provide a safe haven for Taliban or pro-Taliban groups for a long time to come.

Iran retains a broadly constructive relationship with the Afghan Government and the two countries have many issues in common on which they can and do cooperate—refugees, economic development, energy and counter-narcotics.⁶⁰ However, confrontations between Iran and the USA and the international community over a number of issues—Iran's nuclear programme, the foreign military presences in Iraq and Afghanistan and concern that the Afghan Government is a puppet for international interests—have all undermined Iran's potential to fully collaborate with the international community in Afghanistan. The US and British governments have both claimed that Iran may be providing military assistance to the Taliban, indicating that weapons and explosive devices destined for the

⁵⁵ Hechtkopf (note 4).

⁵⁶ Lozada, C., 'A conversation with David Kilcullen', *Washington Post*, 22 Mar. 2009.

⁵⁷ Naylor, S., 'US officer: Pakistani forces aided Taliban', *Defense News*, 19 Sep. 2008.

⁵⁸ Rashid, A., 'A dangerous void in Pakistan', *Yale Global Online*, 4 Mar. 2009, <<http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/display.article?id=12048>>.

⁵⁹ Masood, T., 'The Sultan of Swat', *Foreign Policy*, 20 Mar. 2009.

⁶⁰ Bruno, G. and Beehner, L., 'Iran and the future of Afghanistan', Background, Council on Foreign Relations, 30 Mar. 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/publication/13578/iran_and_the_future_of_afghanistan.html>.

Taliban have been intercepted entering Afghanistan over the Iranian border.⁶¹

IV. International institutions on the ground

International institutions continue to make crucial contributions to stability, reconstruction, development and governance efforts in Afghanistan. Many of their operational problems—whether attempting to bring military power, political skill or financial support to bear—are similar. However, general statements of principle (e.g. the need to be better coordinated, to have a regional approach, to have a comprehensive or integrated approach, the preference for political solutions over military, the need to empower local communities) have a habit of looking good in isolation but floundering when faced with the often very complex realities on the ground. Three diverse international institutions currently active in Afghanistan—the United Nations, NATO and ISAF, and the EU—offer specific insights into operational difficulties.

The United Nations

Through the 1979 Soviet invasion, the civil war and the arrival of the Taliban, the UN has a long and sustained track record in Afghanistan. The UN played a crucial role in organizing a new political framework among key Afghan powerbrokers at the Bonn conference in December 2001. A dedicated UN mission, UNAMA, was established in March 2002. Its role has been to coordinate political and humanitarian issues, helping to create interim and transitional Afghan Government administrations and assisting with the holding of elections. UNAMA has undertaken to improve coordination within the international community and between UNAMA and ISAF. It co-chairs the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Body (JCMB) with the Afghan Government for this purpose.

The UN has developed a strong knowledge of the country and its political dynamics. It has genuine credibility, being both recognized and respected. There are weaknesses, however. Like many international groups, it is accused of having a large and expensive logistical tail and, with the salaries that it is able to offer, siphoning off talented Afghans for use as drivers, interpreters and administrative staff.⁶² Given the poor security situation, the United Nations is increasingly unable to operate across large parts of

⁶¹ Clark, K., 'Taliban claim weapons supplied by Iran', *Daily Telegraph*, 14 Sep. 2008; and Denyer, D., 'Iran must stop supporting Taliban, says U.S. commander', Reuters, 6 Mar. 2009, <<http://www.nationalpost.com/story.html?id=1361527>>.

⁶² Lamb, C., 'Afghans plead for £25bn in aid as disorder grows', *The Times*, 8 June 2008.

the country.⁶³ This sometimes leaves other international institutions, such as ISAF, to take the lead in traditionally civilian political, development and coordination activities, which undermines important contributions that the UN could make.⁶⁴ UNAMA's role as a coordinator of international efforts has been criticized for ineffectiveness, notably by Oxfam in early 2008.⁶⁵ Some of these charges were acknowledged by the UN Under-Secretary-General for Peacekeeping Operations, Jean-Marie Guéhenno.⁶⁶ There are also charges that the UN mission lacks strong and decisive leadership.⁶⁷ However, its role in Afghanistan being frequently overshadowed by the actions of other countries (the USA) and institutions (NATO/ISAF) makes UNAMA's role as a coordinator even harder.

NATO and the International Security Assistance Force

In 2003 the practice of rotating command of ISAF among lead nations ended, and command was handed to NATO.⁶⁸ ISAF is NATO's largest operation ever and its first outside Europe. The strength of ISAF is the military power and experience associated with the long-standing NATO alliance, in particular the resources and the commonality of working practices and military doctrine. The NATO-led effort undertakes a lot of humanitarian tasks, particularly through the PRTs. Frequently these are tasks (e.g. food distribution and medical aid) that NGOs should be doing but cannot because of the precarious security situation.

However, for all this apparent strength, the NATO command structure struggles. ISAF comprises 41 individual states, all controlled by their respective governments for the duration of their deployment. There are often fundamental differences between states about what they are in Afghanistan to do and how it should be done. These differences are evident in the specific national provisos regarding what a specific country is prepared to do, particularly with regard to combat operations. These provisos have been much criticized both within and outside NATO. In October 2008

⁶³ United Nations (note 2).

⁶⁴ Author's conversation with PRT members, July 2008.

⁶⁵ Oxfam International, 'Falling short: aid effectiveness in Afghanistan', Press release, 20 Mar. 2008, <http://www.oxfam.org/en/news/2008/pr080325_donors_failing_afghanistan>; and 'U.N.'s Ban defends his Afghanistan envoy Eide', Reuters, 23 Mar. 2009, <<http://www.reuters.com/article/featuredCrisis/idUSN23295482>>.

⁶⁶ UN News Centre, 'UN peacekeeping chief calls for mandate of Afghan mission to be sharpened', 12 Mar. 2008, <<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=25946>>.

⁶⁷ Norton-Taylor, R., 'Britain calls for greater UN involvement in Afghanistan', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2007.

⁶⁸ Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), 'Afghanistan: NATO to take over command of ISAF', 17 Apr. 2003, <<http://wwwwww.reliefweb.int/w/rwb.nsf/0/7adba03ab7d928b085256d0b0075ef29>>.

General John Craddock, NATO's Supreme Allied Commander Europe, noted that

the will of our alliance in the mission in Afghanistan demonstrates some real shortcomings. In view of the more than 70 national operational restrictions, we call them 'caveats', and our continual inability to fill our agreed-upon statement of requirements in theatre we are demonstrating a political will that is sometimes wavering.

And it is this wavering political will that impedes operational progress and brings into question the relevancy of the alliance here in the 21st century.⁶⁹

Although Germany is routinely singled out for its reluctance to provide more combat troops, many states share this reluctance—despite repeated warnings and calls from numerous ISAF and NATO senior commanders.⁷⁰

Provincial reconstruction teams

NATO is very active, through ISAF, in the work of the PRTs. These small and largely multinational military and civilian groups—initially a localized US military initiative—are intended to 'assist the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan to extend its authority, in order to facilitate the development of a stable and secure environment in the identified area of operations, and enable Security Sector Reform and reconstruction efforts'.⁷¹

Coming under the military command of the NATO-led ISAF, PRTs form a significant part of the international community's military and financial effort to assist Afghanistan. First established over the winter of 2002–2003, by the end of 2008 there were 26 PRTs, run by 15 different states. Although a PRT Steering Committee—involving the Afghan Government, ISAF, the UN, the EU and PRT lead nation representatives—attempts to give direction to the PRTs' work, this is difficult.⁷² While there is much well-intentioned activity and often dangerous work being undertaken on the ground, the absence of strategy and coordination means that the PRTs—like many other international institutions in Afghanistan—are almost certainly significantly underperforming. PRTs often focus on short-term but highly visible development projects that may be difficult to sustain. Afghan expectations of rapid reconstruction and improved security are very high and PRTs have

⁶⁹ Craddock, J. (Gen.), Supreme Allied Commander Europe, 'NATO operations: internal and external challenges', Address to the Royal United Services Institute for Defence and Security Studies, 20 Oct. 2008, <<http://www.nato.int/shape/opinions/2008/s081020a.htm>>.

⁷⁰ Brunnstrom, D., 'U.S. to call for more NATO troops for Afghanistan', Reuters, 9 Oct. 2008, <<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L8600259.htm>>.

⁷¹ ISAF, PRT handbook for Afghanistan, Oct. 2006.

⁷² Stapleton, B. J., 'A means to what end? Why PRTs are peripheral to the bigger political challenges in Afghanistan', *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1 (autumn 2007).

generally failed to match or manage them.⁷³ PRTs are still predominantly military units and many NGOs remain ambivalent about working with them.⁷⁴ According to one Afghan political adviser,

the expansion of PRT numbers and funding has not had a significant impact on the interlinked political and security crises in Afghanistan... In many respects the PRTs may have proved more relevant to the needs of the international community, in allowing the promotion publicly of good news over bad, than to the stabilisation of the country.⁷⁵

A review of the PRT concept is overdue. Suggestions for changing the approach have included involving more Afghan representatives, extending the role of civilian experts, enlisting civilian PRT leaders or even closing down some PRTs in areas where the Afghan Government is moderately functional. However, many states see PRTs as 'their' demonstration of commitment to Afghanistan and may be reluctant to change them, despite the criticism. For the immediate future, it is likely that they will remain in place as a well-intentioned but fragmented and inefficient effort, exemplifying the complexities of multinational activities in Afghanistan.

The European Union

The EU has been present in Afghanistan and delivering humanitarian assistance from the early 1990s. After the fall of the Taliban, the EU became one of the leading financial contributors to Afghan development efforts, spending €1 billion (\$1.5 billion) from 2002 to 2006 and allocating a further €0.6 billion (\$0.95 billion) until 2010.⁷⁶ The EU has a planned commitment for aid and financial assistance in Afghanistan until at least 2013, which it intends to align closely with the Afghanistan National Development Strategy.⁷⁷

However, there appear to be several problems with effective application of the funds, such as donors failing to coordinate among themselves or with the Afghan Government and more money being promised than disbursed.⁷⁸ Although many EU member states have military forces deployed in Afghanistan as part of ISAF, the EU has no formal military involvement or

⁷³ Ibrahimi, S., 'Northern governor lashes out at NATO', Institute for War and Peace Reporting, *Afghan Recovery Report* no. 261, 23 July 2007, <<http://www.iwpr.net/?p=arr&s=f&o=337318>>.

⁷⁴ Stapleton (note 72).

⁷⁵ Stapleton (note 72).

⁷⁶ Barroso, J. M., President of the European Commission, 'The EC in Afghanistan: ongoing commitment and future priorities', Speech, 3 Apr. 2008, <http://www.europa-eu-un.org/articles/en/article_7806_en.htm>.

⁷⁷ European Commission, 'Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, 2007–2013', Country Strategy Paper, <http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/afghanistan/index_en.htm>.

⁷⁸ Oxfam International (note 65).

mandate in Afghanistan. However, the European Union Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan) was established in June 2007. With a budget of €64 million (\$0.96 million) for its first two years, it 'aims at contributing to the establishment of sustainable and effective civilian policing arrangements under Afghan ownership'.⁷⁹ Its original recruitment target was 200 personnel, although in 2008 this figure—which had yet to be attained—was increased to 400.⁸⁰

EUPOL Afghanistan has been seriously criticized and one EU representative described the whole mission as 'too little, too late'.⁸¹ The main charges are that the mission was inadequately planned, poorly staffed and lacking in commitment. It has been noted that 'EU efforts in Afghanistan appear to stem from political opportunity more than anything else' and that EUPOL Afghanistan, specifically, is 'seen by some as a means for Germany to substitute its commitment to Afghanistan from a military one to the civilian mission'.⁸²

V. Conclusions

Towards the middle of 2008 there was an unprecedented shift in the media and among analysts towards seeing the conflict in Afghanistan as unwinnable and the country's long-term prospects continue to look bleak and uncertain. Although it is encouraging that the international community, and the USA in particular, is reassessing the motivations and goals of their Afghan agendas, the sense of international war-weariness and increased willingness to compromise on expectations for Afghanistan appears strong. Despite the optimism following the election of US President Barack Obama, judgement can be only temporarily suspended. The 'new' strategy looks very similar to old ones and a lot depends on how effectively the Obama Administration can apply itself over the next year or two, before individual states start to withdraw their troops.

The next two or three years may well see a redefinition of 'success' that will enable the withdrawal of international forces, but what the Afghan population makes of this will be the crucial factor. A rushed declaration of Afghan Government capability followed by a hasty international exit would

⁷⁹ Council of the European Union, 'EU Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan)', <http://consilium.europa.eu/cms3_fo/showPage.asp?id=1268&lang=en>.

⁸⁰ Council of the European Union (note 79). On EUPOL Afghanistan see appendix 3A in this volume.

⁸¹ 'EUPOL Afghanistan still lacking', Deutsche Welle, 1 Oct. 2008, <<http://www2.dw-world.de/southasia/germany/1.234509.1.html>>; and Author's interview with EU representative, 2008.

⁸² Gya, G., 'EUPOL Afghanistan: an opportunity for whom?', *European Security Review*, no. 33 (May 2007), pp. 4, 5.

risk leaving behind a dangerously messy political and security situation for future international intervention forces.

Regrettably, Afghanistan's fate over the next few years still looks to be extremely finely balanced. Progress will continue to be slow, flawed and fragile. Any number of factors, such as a political assassination, an ISAF or Afghan civilian mass-casualty incident, or a shift in warlord allegiances, could individually or in combination cause progress to unravel. Although much of the Obama Administration's thinking on Afghanistan hinges on Pakistan, the situation there looks set to deteriorate further in the next few years.

With states looking to reduce or withdraw their troops and assets, the wavering commitment of the international community is not going unnoticed by the Afghan Government, the Afghan population and, perhaps of most concern, the insurgents.⁸³ Perhaps the only fact that can be really guaranteed for an Obama strategy, based on the international community's experience over the past seven years, is that future political, military and development efforts in and around Afghanistan will be more complex, take longer and yield more fragile results than originally expected.

⁸³ The Taliban are quoted as saying that 'mistrust which is existing between USA and her allies and in the view of the fact that many of them do not want any more to remain entangled in Afghanistan. They are trying to pull out of the country so it will be hardly possible for US to face the resistance movement successfully.' Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, 'NATO member countries apparently not toeing US line', 17 Jan. 2009, <http://www.theunjustmedia.com/Afghanistan/Statements/Jan09/NATO_member_countries_apparently_not_toeing_US_line.htm>. It is rarely possible to have complete confidence that statements purporting to come from the Taliban are genuine, but statements from Taliban media spokesmen are routinely carried on TheUnJustMedia.com, a global jihadi website, even when the Taliban website itself has been taken off-line.