NATO and Afghanistan: Saving the State-Building Enterprise

Mr. Daoud Yaqub
Research Scholar, Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (The Middle East and Central Asia)
Australian National University

Dr. William Maley
Professor and Director, Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy
Australian National University

Afghanistan presents NATO with both its greatest opportunity and its most pressing threat. An alliance established to secure Europe from the might of the Soviet Union at a time dominated by Cold War tensions is now struggling to find its direction in a very different environment, and is under pressure to transform its way of operating at both military and political levels. The current tensions within the alliance do not constitute the first intramural crisis in NATO's history, but they are potentially the most corrosive. If NATO's Afghanistan mission comes to be seen as a failure, it is difficult to envisage other constructive purposes to which the alliance might readily be put in a post-Soviet world. NATO as an Atlantic alliance depends on a web of working relationships between NATO capitals, which a failure in a theater of operations such as Afghanistan could easily rupture.

Yet between these capitals there are indeed subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) differences in understanding what the Afghanistan mission involves, and how it should be conceived. These differences are rooted in the countries' senses of what roles they should play in the world, in their distinct military cultures, and in their own domestic politics. For some in Washington, Afghanistan is one of a number of theaters in a global struggle, and perhaps not the most important. In December 2007, the chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael G. Mullen, remarked that "in Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq we do what we must." Yet to many observers in Europe, Iraq is a war of choice, and as a result Europe has no particular duty to shoulder a heavier burden in Afghanistan. The Afghan government and people are victims of this tension.
Nevertheless, there are still significant opportunities for NATO to grasp in Afghanistan. The momentum of transition can be recovered if the right policy settings are put in place. NATO’s current approach is flawed. It is constrained by national caveats that create uneven capabilities. It involves minimal investment, matched by minimal results. Ordinary Afghans do not feel that their lives have been made secure by an international presence. The state-building exercise has largely passed them by. And in too many parts of too many provinces, ordinary people are being subjected to brutality and violence by killers operating from sanctuaries in Pakistan about which NATO members appear bewilderingly silent. In August 2007, Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, speaking at the Kabul “Peace Jirga,” said, “there is no doubt Afghan militants are supported from Pakistan soil. The problem that you have in your region is because support is provided from our side.” This should be as intolerable for NATO as it is for Afghanistan. Sustained, relentless pressure on Pakistan to choke off this support must be the centerpiece of an integrated NATO approach to Afghanistan. Only once the problem of the sanctuaries has been solved will real progress on other fronts be possible.

CHALLENGES IN STABILIZING AFGHANISTAN: POLITICAL AND SECURITY DIMENSIONS.

The situation in Afghanistan is close to critical. This is not so much a result of recent miscalculations as of deeper problems in the post-2001 transition, which are now becoming more and more obvious. The complex and overlapping structure of post-Taliban ministries, the heavy footprint of the international donor community, the failure to maintain momentum through the rapid expansion beyond Kabul of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), the political and operational weaknesses of the NATO alliance, the inadequacy of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) as a substitute for ISAF expansion, and the availability to the Taliban of sanctuaries in Pakistan have all contributed to the present combustible situation, as has the spread of organized crime networks and the surge in opium cultivation.

But so have deeper social and economic fault lines. The Taliban’s ability to function in southern Afghanistan depends in part on the labyrinthine complexities of tribal politics, and on their ability to paint themselves as defenders of poor opium farmers (and their dependents, notably wage-laborers) who fear the eradication of crops in an economy where decades of destruction have limited the range of viable livelihoods. (It is important also to recognize that there is no single “opium problem” in Afghanistan with a single “cure”; rather, there is considerable variation in the factors underpinning opium cultivation, and consequently in the measures that are likely to be effective in addressing the “opium issue.”) An equally severe challenge arises from the continuing activity of illegal armed groups—nominally to
be disbanded under the so-called “DIAG process”—which blunt the capacity of even the best Afghan provincial officials to deliver good governance. All these problems have interacted with each other in complex ways. One consequence is that there is no single “magic” solution to Afghanistan’s problems, but rather a need for coherent policies and appropriate mechanisms of implementation, both within and beyond Afghanistan’s borders, across a range of different spheres. State-building requires security, but durable security requires a legitimate state. The future of Afghanistan depends on how effectively these problems are addressed, and so does the future of NATO.

The Taliban are not in a position to march on Kabul, but that has never been their immediate intention. Their principal strategic aim, and that of their backers, is rather to sustain that level of violence required to sap the will of NATO and other states currently supporting the Karzai government. The mere spectacle of such a weakening discourages ordinary Afghans from actively supporting the government and encourages them to sit on the fence. From the Taliban’s viewpoint, it opens the door for them at some point in the future to press their demands on Kabul from a position of strength. The nightmare scenario arising from this is that of a West Asian “badlands” region flowing from Pakistan into Afghanistan in which the sovereignty of the Afghan and Pakistani states is almost entirely nominal and local groups with radical agendas merge with Al-Qaeda and readily find hospitality—in other words, an expanded version of the very conditions that led to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

REFINING INTERNATIONAL OBJECTIVES:
COUNTERTERRORISM, STATE-BUILDING, AND TENSIONS BETWEEN THE TWO

One of the sources of confusion in Afghanistan is that different actors have been pursuing parallel, overlapping, and uncoordinated agendas, in ways that work against comprehensive successes being achieved. The Afghan government remains structurally weak and dependent in many respects. The United States has been long distracted by the Iraq conflict, and now increasingly by the change of administration that will come in January 2009. NATO itself has been buffeted by the diverse priorities of its own member states. All this has been very obvious, to Afghan and non-Afghan observers alike, and the effect has been to undermine confidence that Afghanistan’s transition will ultimately succeed. Afghanistan and the Afghans need to be returned to the center of our focus.

Defining the Afghan mission as part of a “global war on terror” has fostered an unduly-narrow understanding of how Afghanistan’s problems should be solved. It suggests a need simply for “counterterrorism” operations on Afghan territory to eliminate a known
enemy. But the agenda of “state-building” since 2001 has also been unduly narrow, focusing on the establishment of a western-style democratic political system in Kabul, a society in which decades of disruption have seen political loyalties shift to a range of non-state actors with their own claims to legitimacy. (On average, Afghanistan in the decade following the April 1978 communist coup witnessed “unnatural deaths” totaling over 240 people every day. To put this in perspective, the Madrid bombings of March 2004 caused 191 deaths.) Amidst all this, what has been lost is a sense of the positive connection between state-building and counterterrorism. In the long run, what pays dividends is not the killing or capture of individual terrorists, but rather the elimination of environments in which they can thrive. Few environments are as accommodating as that of the failed, collapsed, or severely-disrupted state. State-building is thus not a drain on counterterrorism, but rather an essential condition for it to succeed. But much hinges on what kind of state is built. A state, to be legitimate, must act in such a way that it wins real and meaningful support from the bulk of the population. This, in turn, requires attention to day-to-day security and access to effective justice for ordinary people so that they have a stake in the success of the state and lend support to its consolidation. In Afghanistan, justice and security are largely missing from ordinary peoples’ lives. However, the centralized approach to building justice and security has not worked, and a new focus on local institutions is necessary.

**NATO’s role in promoting security and good governance: Winning rather than “not losing”**

In 2001, a significant shift occurred in Afghan society, one that presented the world with a unique opportunity in the post-Taliban transition: for the first time in their history Afghans wanted and welcomed foreign troops in their country in the hope that they would alter the status quo. The average Afghan felt disdain for the Taliban leadership and Al-Qaeda terrorists, but also for the criminal and predatory behavior of a significant number of local officials and armed groups. However, the international approach to security in Afghanistan reflected a narrow focus on hunting Al-Qaeda, while ignoring basic personal security for Afghan citizens. This sentiment was clearly reflected in a speech to the New America Foundation in August 2006 by Ambassador James Dobbins, the U.S. envoy to the 2001 Bonn Process, when he remarked that “my instructions didn't say anything about democracy...We wanted a government that would work with us to track down remaining Al-Qaeda elements.”

Although a modest shift has occurred in the international approach to the provision of security in Afghanistan, there are still very significant gaps to overcome due to past neglect and missed opportunities. It is essential to complement counterterrorism operations with equal focus on delivering security to the Afghans and building the capacity of Afghan law
and order institutions. The resources committed to increasing personal security for Afghans are still far less than those committed to the building of state security institutions such as the army and the police. Figures cited in a December 2005 World Bank study showed that only 3 percent of security expenditure was directed to the justice sector. Furthermore, police reform has fallen far short of what is required. Afghan citizens must feel personally secure in order to understand and participate in the process of change and to make informed choices without fear of reprisals or intimidation. To this end, building the institutional capacity of the Afghan state to deliver security for ordinary Afghans should not be incidental to fighting Al-Qaeda, but should receive equal attention and resources. This is the key to winning rather than "not losing."

Lessons learned from previous international interventions in the last several decades clearly indicate that international commitment and resources are not infinite. For this reason, one must promptly seize the opportunity to effect long-lasting change by building the capacity of national institutions to ensure a smooth and sustained transition to stability as international commitment decreases. The successful implantation of such a seamless transition is widely accepted as the ultimate exit strategy in post-conflict transition for the international community.

**CHALLENGES OF COORDINATION**

The international community, including governments, donors, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) talks endlessly of coordination. Yet no one truly wants to be coordinated. The challenges posed by lack of coordination are clear: waste, inefficiency, duplication, ad hoc solutions or structures, and institutional tensions. There are many “lessons learned” reports detailing the importance of coordination on the ground, and many governmental and academic agencies discuss these challenges at length. Yet looking at the current situation in Afghanistan, one could easily conclude that while we know the benefits of coherent and strategic coordination, perhaps the real issue is “lessons not yet learned.”

The international community is not a homogeneous entity and the requirement for demonstrable progress in donor capitals is occasionally inconsistent with international consensus and Afghan capacity-building and ownership. The temptation to promote personalities that can quickly deliver, rather than exercise patience to promote and develop national institutions, can be overwhelming. The rapid turnover of military personnel may be a common occurrence in western military institutions, but it does not bode well for long-term institution building in a post-conflict transition. In Afghanistan’s case, the rapid rotation of ISAF lead-countries may have certain benefits, but it also has shortfalls that should be addressed. From the
first deployment of ISAF I in December 2001 to the current deployment of ISAF XI in February 2008, with each new rotation or change of lead-country, significant turnover in personnel has also occurred at the NATO/ISAF headquarters. While it is understandable for those deployed to engage in combat operations to be rotated quickly, the challenges of coordination in the Afghan context require much longer tours for NATO/ISAF staff, especially for the policy and intelligence teams. Longer deployments would not only enable the staff to develop much deeper knowledge and cultural understanding, but could also help them to establish better relationships with their counterparts in the Afghan government. Lengthier deployments could additionally reduce some of the pressures from donor capitals to deliver results quickly, and allow the staff to approach their tasks with long-term strategic vision.

**STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PRT MODEL**

Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) were first deployed to Gardez, Kunduz, and Bamiyan by the United States in 2003. The PRTs are joint teams composed of civilian and military personnel. These teams have now expanded to 25 locations in Afghanistan under the auspices of the NATO-led ISAF. The PRT model initially highlighted three areas of activities: security, support to the central government, and reconstruction; later on, the ISAF PRTs also added the mandate of facilitating security sector reform. Though the objectives of the PRTs appear noble, achieving progress in these sectors has proved to be problematic. PRTs do not operate in a vacuum; one must place them in the context of the current setting in Afghanistan. They have a general mandate to engage in essential state-building tasks, yet have vulnerabilities that can undermine, or at the very least limit their effectiveness in discharging the very tasks they are envisioned to accomplish. Some PRTs, such as the New Zealand PRT in Bamiyan and the early British PRT in Mazar-e Sharif, have struck the right balance between delivering results locally and allowing Afghan priorities to flourish. Others have been much less successful.

First of all, the security imperatives driven by counterterrorism operations that require cooperation from local actors have on occasion been at odds with the development and reconstruction agendas and priorities of local institutions. PRT commanders have little control over key assets such as transport, and often must support the military mission of maneuver forces co-located with the teams. Military missions are often associated with gaining short-term tactical advantage, and can thus compromise long-term strategic objectives essential to reconstruction and development priorities. Furthermore, military deployments in combat theaters are replete with short-term rotations that hamper efforts to sustain institutional knowledge in a very complex environment. With each new rotation of troops or personnel,
there is a tendency to reinvent the wheel. It is cumbersome to rebuild trust with new arrivals in an unstable locality, trust that previously may have been painstakingly built through many interactions. In some parts of Afghanistan, the locals have become so cynical about these personnel rotations that whenever their houses are once again searched by coalition soldiers, they assume that there has been yet another rotation and new soldiers have arrived who have not been adequately briefed on their predecessors' activities. The tribal elders then have to go through the process of rebuilding trust with the new international security elements. More importantly, those whose houses are searched needlessly suffer fresh loss of face in a society in which standing and reputation are very important to a person's sense of dignity.

In order to achieve synergies and results in the stability, reconstruction, and development agendas, PRTs must learn to coordinate their activities within the civil and military components comprising the PRT, and coordinate with other PRTs, local personalities and officials, national authorities, national capitals, embassies, UN agencies, and other international elements. Coordination is a task that has proven to be difficult even for large and well-staffed institutions, and it is time-consuming. It is far from clear that PRTs are adequately resourced and staffed to meet this challenge.

As long-time observers have noted, Afghanistan is a kaleidoscope of micro-societies, based on ethnic, linguistic, sectarian, and geographic alliances or in some instances the influence of a dominant personality. The last three decades of conflict have disrupted these micro-societies significantly, have altered the leadership dynamics at the local levels, and have made many Afghan state institutions vulnerable to corruption. Any state-building enterprise must account for these vulnerabilities and disruptions. Success in extending the writ of the central government wholly depends on re-establishing the dynamics of appropriate and institutionalized channels of interaction between these micro-societies and the central authorities.

PRT operational practice on the ground, however, does not reflect this approach and therefore undermines traditional leaders within these micro-societies. Such dignitaries and local notables are disenfranchised at the level of the central state because the state-building enterprise has a significant focus upon managing relations with a donor community using technical skills that tribal leaders lack; and traditional leaders are also disenfranchised at the local level as a result of the allocation of state offices in rural areas to potential spoilers as rewards. This has created a great deal of frustration and even anger among people in that sphere of social life. Yet these traditional leaders and elements are the very figures whose active support could critically tip the balance in favor of more effective consolidation of state structures and eventually the defeat of the insurgency. Thus, PRTs have a very mixed record. While some have
performed well, others have inadvertently thwarted the strengthening of the Afghan state by in effect replacing it at local levels.

**TRANSATLANTIC TENSIONS OVER AFGHANISTAN: WAYS OF MOVING FORWARD**

U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates commented in February 2008 that many European allies "have a problem with our involvement in Iraq and project that to Afghanistan." Though Gates has a long legacy to overcome, his forthright remarks on the Iraq-Afghanistan linkage are a welcome departure from the enigmatic logic advanced by the Bush-Cheney axis of the administration and some military leaders. For instance, at a White House press conference in July 2007, Frances F. Townsend, homeland security adviser to President Bush, denied that Iraq and Afghanistan were separate conflicts. "These are clearly a single conflict by a single determined enemy who is looking for safe haven," said Townsend. While it may be convenient or necessary in certain circles in Washington to advance the view that the central front in the war on terror is Iraq, this logic is not widely accepted elsewhere in the world. The more the U.S. administration has sought to link Iraq and Afghanistan, the more flawed and nebulous the concept has become for the European public, and the more public support for combat operations in Afghanistan drops. *Transatlantic Trends*, a public opinion survey released annually by the German Marshall Fund of the United States, showed in 2007 that European support for combat operations against the Taliban in Afghanistan was only about 30 percent. The U.S. administration cannot continue to assign secondary status to Afghanistan but demand that its NATO partners put their troops' lives at risk in Afghanistan's mountains and on its plains. This is particularly the case when U.S. resource commitments fall short of U.S. rhetoric.

On January 31, 2008, this was captured in the observation of U.S. Senator Joseph R. Biden, Jr. during a hearing of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. "We've spent about as much on development aid in Afghanistan over the past five years as we spend on the war in Iraq every three weeks," said Biden. Nor should the United States seek to use Afghanistan as a platform to exact rapid transformation of the alliance in order to have greater European involvement in the "global war on terror." If the United States wants NATO to play a greater role in Afghanistan, it must permanently de-link Iraq and Afghanistan.

All said and done, the material demands that NATO currently faces are not enormous—essentially 20 additional helicopters, several hundred trainers for police, and three maneuver battalions. Every day that passes without these modest demands being met see NATO's credibility slip a little further.
SOVEREIGNTY, LOCAL OWNERSHIP, AND LEGITIMACY

While the Afghan government is formally sovereign and told by the international community that it is in the driver's seat, in many respects it enjoys the sovereignty of the taxi driver, subject to the passengers' decisions about the direction the taxi should take. This is not so in all spheres, as the recent blocking of a nominee for appointment as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General made clear. However, it is largely true in areas where the mobilization of substantial resources is required. This is a significant obstacle to the building of its credibility in Afghanistan, where credit for reconstruction all too easily goes to NGOs, international organizations, or private commercial contractors funded by donors who have opted to bypass the Afghan state.

This is often defended by reference to the limited absorptive capacity of Afghan government agencies, and there is some truth in this complaint. It points, however, to a deeper flaw in the approach to state-building that has been taken by the donors, namely the reluctance to engage in serious capacity-building programs and an over-reliance on experts brought in at considerable cost from developed countries. In some areas, this has produced worthwhile returns, but there have been some strikingly perverse consequences. These include the payment of astronomical salaries to international consultants or Afghans holding Western passports, whose work is not necessarily superior to that of locally-employed Afghans who receive only a tiny fraction of what international advisors and émigrés are paid. Properly-chosen and properly-deployed consultants and trainers lead to positive results. On the other hand, poorly-chosen and inappropriately-placed consultants and trainers lead to negative results for both the international community and local institutions. Poor planning and poorly-chosen personnel also militate against the development of local capacities on which long-term sustainability depends, since unqualified or inappropriately-placed consultants create dysfunctions, blur missions and roles, and create paralysis in the system that can persist long after they depart. This problem has been compounded by the problem of the "second civil service," namely the network of non-state agencies undertaking state-like activities, which acts as a beacon for talented locals by the return or survival of some bureaucrats from Afghanistan's past who are unequal to the management of a modern state but tenacious in blocking the endeavors of those who are—often by seeking to exploit patronage networks or links to donors; and by a proliferation of bureaucratic offices that compete with each other and draw foreign patrons into their struggles, often to the point that the patrons themselves become active participants in bureaucratic battles.

The dilemma for the Afghan government is that it is confronted by all the expectations that a population normally entertains of a sovereign government, while lacking
the capacities to meet those expectations. This is a recipe for a crisis of state legitimacy from which the only winners will be the Taliban. Since expectations can be managed to only a limited degree, it is vital to take steps to enhance the state's capacities, and to put on display some of the goods that a competent state can deliver. It is far better to do a few key things well than many things badly. Again, the focus for this activity should be at the district level rather than simply in Kabul. Kabul's role should be the setting of strategic priorities and the monitoring of their implementation.

**POLITICAL SOLUTIONS: MEETING THE CHALLENGE OF INSURGENCY**

The persistence of costly insurgent activity in southern and eastern Afghanistan has prompted some discussion of whether there might be a "political solution" to the challenge posed by the "Neo-Taliban." At one level, of course, the door has long been open—through the "Program for Strengthening of Peace"—for former Taliban combatants to pledge to accept the new constitution, and this program has by most accounts been uncontroversial. Nor is there any particular problem with moves to engage with fence-sitters, or even groups that for reasons of perceived self-interest may at some time have lent support to the insurgency. The same is not true, however, of proposals to enter negotiations with hard-core Taliban. It should be noted that while the Afghan government expelled two European officials in December 2007 for allegedly dealing with Taliban elements in Helmand, it was not on the basis that contacts of that kind were beyond the pale, but rather on the basis that it was the right of the Afghan government to play the lead role in undertaking such activities.

Given that the Taliban leadership in Pakistan remains intransigent, and has ready access to new combatants being trained in its Pakistan-based sanctuaries, even a successful strategy of negotiating with Taliban in Afghanistan might simply change the mix of forces to be confronted. But there is a potential second-order effect to highlight as well. As noted earlier, the mere spectacle of high-level negotiations with the Taliban may deter Afghans from throwing their weight behind the Afghan government, lest they be left stranded if a later deal with the Taliban gives the Taliban local dominance. Even riskier is the idea of paying Taliban sympathizers to support the government. This strategy of appealing to the financial self-interest of local actors was attempted by the regime of Dr. Najibullah between 1989 and 1992 using Soviet-supplied funds, and its weakness was exposed by the collapse of the regime within months of the cut-off of those funds at the end of 1991. Such an approach also invites Afghans to take up an adversarial stance toward Kabul (in the hope that they will be paid to be cooperative), and in the worst case could result in Western governments inadvertently funding the Taliban in exchange for trivial cooperation.
PRACTICAL STEPS IN PROMOTING GOOD GOVERNANCE: PRIORITIES, RESOURCES, AND SEQUENCING

There are, however, a number of useful practical steps that can be taken to address the governance problems that Afghanistan faces. So far, rebuilding the central state has been a priority objective for the Afghan leadership and its supporters. This has been at the expense of local government, where opportunities exist to re-engage with significant elements of the population, particularly tribal elders who have been disenfranchised at the levels of both the center and the periphery. Reinvigorating local government should be given top priority in governance reforms. The provincial councils which were elected in 2005 have done little to empower local forces, largely through lack of significant constitutional responsibilities. Funds for local projects have been repeatedly promised or pledged, but in terms of on-the-ground delivery, a huge gap remains. This should be bridged as a matter of urgency. This may require attention not only to circumstances in Afghanistan, but also to the appropriation and audit mechanisms in donor states that often militate quite unrealistically against the prompt supply of funds when they are needed.

At the level of the central state, there is a desperate need to open channels of promotion on merit, and to provide support for meritorious appointees as they work within ministries and agencies. The contentious political atmosphere within and between various components of the Afghan state has seen the state lose some of its best staff, something it can ill afford. This problem cannot be easily overcome, but donors should consider discussing with the Afghan government ways of ensuring that the monies being supplied are well-used by the best possible staff. It may also be useful to reconsider the structure and operation of the Afghan bureaucracy, which is riddled with requirements for multiple official signatures in a way that simply fosters corruption. This was not considered as part of the constitution-drafting process that was concerned with the design of central political institutions rather than the ministerial structure of the government. There is little evidence that this particular issue has been considered seriously at all.

PRACTICAL STEPS IN PROMOTING SECURITY: RECOGNIZING THE ABSOLUTE CENTRALITY OF SANCTUARIES IN PAKISTAN

Statistics clearly demonstrate that 2007 saw a sharp rise in casualty figures and violence in Afghanistan. Officials are quick to point out that the Taliban failed to capture any major territory in 2007 and that NATO won every tactical engagement against the Taliban. Yet,
that does not accurately reflect the reality as seen on the ground, nor does it set an appropriate standard for success. A primary tactical objective of the insurgency is to create distance and division between the population and government authorities, and to disrupt delivery of services in order to de-legitimise the Afghan government and its international supporters. Numerous polls and data indicate a growing trend toward disillusionment of Afghans in their expectations of both the Afghan government and its international backers.

Since the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) in 2001, a great number of insurgents have been eliminated, a large number have been captured, and a significant number have been reconciled with mainstream society. Yet the threat to Afghan stability has not diminished. The insurgency continues to be fed unabatedly by a steady supply of recruits from long-established networks in Pakistan nurtured by Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) directorate, and more recently by some elements within Afghanistan as tribal differences and rivalries, together with fears of opium eradication, are exploited by the Taliban and their associates to recruit foot soldiers. (Other foot soldiers are directly supplied by drug barons.) Without a comprehensive approach to Afghanistan’s security problems involving robust action on both sides of the border with Pakistan, the “end state” of a democratic and sustainable Afghanistan as defined by the Afghan government and its international partners will not be achieved. Thus far, the international mission in Afghanistan has failed to recognize the inherent contradiction in seeking to promote stability in Afghanistan while upholding Pakistan as a reliable partner in the “global war on terror.” Such confidence in Pakistan is completely misplaced, and the evidence of the use of Pakistan’s territory for nefarious purposes such as training of suicide bombers is compelling, as a September 2007 UN study showed.

The centrality of the safe havens for Al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Pakistan has not been given international attention commensurate to the dangers those safe havens pose for stability in the region and indeed the world. Fearful of pressuring Pakistan, Western leaderships have allowed this threat to fester for much too long. It is true that Pakistan is far from stable, but it is more likely to be radically destabilized by the continuation of a perilous entanglement with extremism than by Western pressure to bring that entanglement to a halt. (Indeed, when the United States applied pressure on Pakistan to prevent Taliban disruption of Afghanistan’s 2004 presidential election, it proved notably successful.) The confidence of Afghan leaders in the United States and its NATO partners has been sorely tested by what they see as undue willingness of Western politicians to accept at face value Pakistan’s protestations of innocence — especially when commanders serving in Afghanistan are prepared to speak with greater candor.
The last time the international community turned a blind eye to Pakistani advancement of its so-called “national interest” through active promotion of the Taliban, airplanes struck the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington.

Thus, there is an immediate need for governments in the region and the international community to work vigorously in order to disrupt the insurgents’ supply chain and dismantle the infrastructure that exists largely on the Pakistani side of the border. If action is not taken promptly; tactical battle success on the ground against the insurgents in Afghanistan will continue to be compromised. Afghans, Europeans, Americans, and troops from other allied nations will continue to take casualties in an environment where public support for combat operations in Afghanistan is eroding.

CONCLUSION

All is not yet lost. There is still hope and scope to build on the goodwill of the Afghans to deliver dividends of a peaceful, stable society to a beleaguered population that has waited three decades to see their lives improve. The ingredients for success do exist and success is achievable. However, if NATO is to succeed, it must subordinate its members’ parochial objectives to Afghanistan’s greater needs. It must recognize that what Afghans see as threats are the threats that have to be addressed. It must ensure that it structures deployments with sufficient continuity of tenure to maintain a proper grasp of the challenges in Afghanistan. It must come to terms with the limitations of its current PRT instruments in the diverse environments in which they operate. Finally, it must be prepared robustly to confront the threat to stability in Afghanistan that sanctuaries in Pakistan pose. On this all else depends. “Muddling through” with less than this is no longer a credible option; it is simply a recipe for a waste of money and lives.

Ruaidh Yaqub is a research scholar in the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies (The Middle East and Central Asia) at the Australian National University. From 1998 to 2001, he was executive director of the Afghanistan Foundation, based in Washington, DC. His current research is focused on security sector reform.

Dr. William Maley is professor and director of the Asia-Pacific College of Diplomacy at the Australian National University. He is author of The Afghanistan Wars (2002) and Rescuing Afghanistan (2006), and edited Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban (1998).