Elections in Afghanistan have been postponed until September as a result of security worries and the low level of voter registration achieved so far. Democratic progress there might be a useful asset for American President George Bush in his re-election bid, but serious long-term international attention is needed to prevent a return to chaos and civil war.

WARLORDS, DRUGS, DEMOCRACY

Warlords are becoming more than warlords after the fall of the Taliban. It is the state building that some analysts believe has expanded outside the capital Kabul. Assisting reconstruction are small civil-military Provincial Reconstruction Teams. With between eighty and two hundred members each, the teams have dual roles of development and security. The international community has successfully overcome the most difficult phase of post-Taliban reconstruction. Pessimists, however, believe that there are no signs of either political stability or military security. The resurgent Taliban poses an ever-increasing threat to the government, to international security forces, and to local and international non-governmental organizations. Warlords and commanders refuse to accept Kabul’s authority, enacting their own mini-fiefdoms and extracting resources through extortion and other criminal activities, including drug-trafficking. Many warlords, aligned to the US-led coalition, are using this relationship to expand their political and military authority at Kabul’s expense.

American efforts to strengthen the government are thus undermined by its reliance on warlords allies to fight Al Qaeda and eliminate the remnants of the Taliban.

The international community’s failure to reconstruct a democratic, liberal, representative government undermines the international community’s criticism of the newly created government institutions is weakened by the way in which they were formed. A manipulated emergency loya jirga undermined the Transitional Administration’s authority, just as a manipulated constituent emergency loya jirga undermined the constitution’s legitimacy. Pessimists have little faith that the forthcoming presidential and parliamentary elections will either free or fair.

BETWEEN CONFLICT AND PEACE

The truth lies somewhere between doomsday scenario and euphoria. Afghanistan remains suspended, somewhere between conflict and peace. The International community has clearly opened windows of opportunity for security and political development. The achievements of the Taliban and the creation of a relatively representative state are a vast improvement.

International commitments and assistance for security and reconstruction have helped. In some regions, to ease the humanitarian and economic infrastructure destroyed by years of civil war. Security is far from guaranteed for most citizens, yet the international military presence has helped keep the warlords and their allies at bay.
as well as international terrorists.

Given continued international support – political, economic and military – the country could move towards a sustained peace, but the threat to that peace requires greater international muscle and the political will to reconsider some unwise policy choices.

**SHORT CUTS DON'T PAY**

Actions will have to be taken, and soon, to prevent the conflict from assuming the shape of an all-out civil war. The international community, which is over-concerned and thus responsible for reconstruction needs to recognize that:

- The process of reconstruction will be slow and painful. Twenty-three years of civil war and external intervention have taken their toll on the state and remaining political structures. The international community will have to be prepared to pay a hands-on role for many years if stability is to be restored.
- Short cuts will simply not pay. The wide gap between existing resource, fiscal and military and those promised will have to be bridged. A failure to bridge the gap will undermine the process as far.
- Popular participation and representation in government are essential for a sustainable peace. External interference or acquiescence in domestic manipulation of political processes will only make matters worse.

**FACING AFGHANISTAN'S CHALLENGES**

There are the most pressing challenges to meet; it would be counter-productive to manipulate the electoral process. Government and UN officials expressed concern about a credible electoral exercise by the first deadline in June, citing insecurity, lack of resources and prior planning.

The UN intends to open 4,200 registration offices by mid-month. As yet, there are only 94 sites in eight cities. A little over ten per cent of the ten and a half million eligible voters have been registered so far, and this includes only two percent of eligible women. From political parties are yet to be registered.

Elections due in late have been postponed until September. If sufficient numbers of voters cannot be enrolled, or there is no freedom of association and expression, and if security conditions do not permit a free and fair process, then elections should be postponed. Anything less would undermine the legitimacy of a future elected government. Yet a definite date for elections is necessary. Otherwise the Transitional Administration's legitimacy will last endure, since its mandate expires in June. It is essential that elections for the president and parliament should be held simultaneously. By-passing parliament, even before its creation, would only generate more friction in an already fractured society.

**WARLORDISM**

The problem of warlordism can no longer be swept under the carpet. The US-led coalition does need local allies to fight terrorism and its agents, but warlords are not the answer. If anything, their presence is contributing to growing popular acceptance, if not support, for a resurgent Taliban.

In the south and east, for instance, the main area of coalition military operations, this continued reliance only serves the Taliban's purposes, as the coalition alienates the very people who welcomed international intervention and the regime's demise.

The coalition must recognize that the warlords have been unreliable allies, providing misinformation that has caused several times more civilian casualties. Many, including a number of prominent Kabul warlords, use a thriving drug trade to arm private militias.

Beyond Kabul, and to a lesser degree even within the capital, warlords employ extortion and violence in a culture of impunity. Some Afghans now remember the Taliban days with nostalgia.

Washington might opt for a quick fix to deal with increasing insecurity and the slow growth of a national army and police. Almost a quarter of the 10,000 army recruits have already absconded. According to coalition commander General David Barno, US special forces would train a few thousand strong National Guard from provincial commanders' soldiers.

Transforming the militias would only legitimate them while undermining international efforts to demilitarize. As yet only 2,000 fighters have been demobilized in Kabul and the cities of Kandahar and Girkot, the first phase of a three-year disarmament programme. The search and eradication is necessary because of Taliban activity, while warlords certainly don't want to dishonor their militias.

Giving these commanders a military role will only promote factional fighting and insubordination. It will not help to extend Kabul's authority.

Continued instability, including the Taliban revival, is seriously undermining recovery. Slow economic progress is in turn adversely affecting political and social reconstruction. How can this chicken-and-egg dilemma be dealt with? Since demobilization and the formation of a credible national army and police force have faltered, an expanded, invigorated international security presence is the only way out.

**MILITARY MISSION**

NATO's decision to take over and expand the International Security Assistance Force is the correct way to continue the work of the Bush administration. NATO's role is becoming more powerful and has now become the primary mission in Afghanistan, much to the dismay of the Taliban. In August, NATO took over the six thousand-strong Assistance Force in Kabul.

Two months later it agreed to expand beyond Kabul and in January, Germany took charge of a provincial reconstruction team in Kandahar, a relatively safe area. The thirteen thousand main US coalition forces command a number of such teams, led by the US, Britain and New Zealand, and intend to set up more.
“Demilitarisation and the formation of a credible national army and police have faltered. An expanded, invigorated international security presence is the only way out.”

Despite appeals from Secretary-General George Robertson and his successor Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, NATO member states are reluctant to deliver the ground troops, logistical and intelligence support and communications necessary for meaningful expansion. For instance, only Turkey and the Netherlands have agreed to provide three Black Hawk helicopters each.

To provide security during the forthcoming electoral process, Washington wants at least ten more NATO-led reconstruction teams, making sixteen in all, Britain, Italy, Turkey and Norway are committed to leading one team each outside Kabul. The Netherlands, Romania and Lithuania have indicated interest in contributing. The French have proposed to deploy a five thousand-strong Franco-German force from the Europepool, but only for six months and in Kabul.

Most NATO states Sweden and Finland have expressed a willingness to contribute. Yet it is unlikely that these teams will be in action by the middle of the year, since member states are reluctant to provide troops in the absence of force protection from the US-led coalition.

NATO intends to set up a northern command in Mazari-Sharif and one in Herat in the West, but the growing insecurity in both centers might discourage member states from committing ground troops in any meaningful manner. The north and southwest most need an international security presence, but there is little that NATO is reluctant to send.

Even if the teams are finally set up, this modest presence may not be sufficient to deal with multiple challenges and demands the threats posed by the Taliban, warlord vendettas and drug dealers. The extension and protection of governmental authority, and safeguards for a free and fair election.

**DRUGS AND WAR**

Since the departure of the Taliban, poppy production has soared. This includes those areas controlled by President Hamid Karzai’s allies. The proceeds of the crop are financing warring factions and undermining Kabul’s authority, it is also a source of funds for the Taliban and their allies as well as Al Qaeda.

Afghanistan is the world’s largest opium producer, providing almost three-quarters of global production. According to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), poppy production last year amounted to 1,600 tonnes. 1.7 million people, seven percent of the population, is directly engaged in it. Almost half a million people globally are involved in the Afghan opium trade, while farmers and traffickers together totaled $2.5 billion last year. In mid-February, at an anti-drug conference in Kabul, UNODC Chief Antonio Maria Costa cautioned the international community against inaction, saying that the next two years will be crucial.

The conference discussed ways of combating the problem, including providing alternative livelihoods, strengthening law enforcement and creating a functioning criminal justice system. Economic alternatives for poor farmers could include the development of horticulture and agriculture as well as the provision of micro-credit. Washington’s preference is for drug eradication. The destruction of crops would alienate farmers but targeting laboratories would hurt the pocketbooks of the traffickers while benefitting the crops.

Britain is training an Afghan Special Narcotics Force but local capability is some distance away. Until then, the US-led coalition and NATO will have to be more proactive. In January, American warplanes destroyed a narco-lab laboratory, but this followed bloody fighting between two northern warlords.

**DECIDING DESTINY**

Afghanistan’s reconstruction is also dependent, to some extent, on its neighbors. Relations between Kabul and Islamabad remain tense, largely because of Pakistan’s perceived support for the Taliban. Most domestic and international observers believe that Islamabad still backs the Taliban since it continues to use Pakistani territory as a sanctuary and recruits from Pakistani madrassas and Afghan refugee camps. There is also a long-standing border dispute, an Afghan government has been reluctant to accept the Durand Line as the international boundary dividing the two. Nothing less than a ceasefire for Pakistan’s intervention will do, especially from Washington. Operations in the tribal areas bordering Afghanistan might have led to the arrest of some Al Qaeda operatives but they have failed to stop any key Taliban leader. Only American pressure can force the military government to take decisive action. However, the international community will also have to address Islamabad’s security worries. An anti-American stance by key officials in Kabul and intervention by traditional adversaries such as Iran and India only feed perceptions that Afghanistan territory will be used to undermine Pakistan’s security. But in the long, Afghanistan has been the battleground for external powers’ Great Games. It is time for the Afghans to begin a chance, with international support, to determine their own destiny.