

The State, Conflict and International Assistance

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There are two major aspects, at the same time inter-related and opposing, which are decisive for the future of Afghanistan – the building of the state and the ongoing conflict. The build-up of a functional state is the main factor in ending the conflict and, at the same time, the conflict constitutes the greatest risk against the state. Both these factors do of course belong to Afghanistan but are also highly dependent on the regional and international political development.

The State

To begin with the state, it had a bad start. The initial political process, decided in the Bonn Agreement, achieved some political outcomes, but they have so far proven to be more of symbolic value than the foundation of a functioning state. Real progress on the ground where it counts, because it would have made a difference for the ordinary people and thus increased the legitimacy of the state, was from the beginning hampered by the strategy of the US which rejected “nation building” and focused solely on hunting down al-Qaida and the Taliban, and to enlist the warlords, commanders and local power holders in order to reach this goal. Thus the commanders were empowered, which in turn meant that state building was marginalised and weakened, unnecessary ethnic tensions emerged, power abuse and corruption started to develop, and wide-spread violations of rights continued with impunity.

The task of state building was handed over to the UN which tried to mobilise the rest of the international community. However, the international commitment to Afghanistan was not impressive – at least not when compared to the considerably more massive efforts made in other similar post-conflict and conflict countries like the Balkans and East Timor. The result was piecemeal, ad-hoc quick fixes and generally badly coordinated and very expensive interventions. In short, the Afghan Government, which was weak, fragmented, both technically and politically, extremely poorly equipped to take on the main responsibility for

a state building process, was basically left to fend for itself while trying desperately, but not very successfully, to bring some rationality into the multitude and utterly confusing assistance packages presented by the international community.

Nonetheless, progress was achieved in areas like education, health, telecommunications, small business, road networks and to some extent in rural development. Also, the economy has moved forward with a stable currency, some increase in revenues and a steady GDP growth. It should be noted that these improvements were made possible mainly due to strong ministries, and that the priorities of donors and/or business interests happened to coincide. In other areas, not less important, like the judiciary and law enforcement, local governance, higher education and agriculture, progress has been limited or not materialised at all.

Today, the overall situation is worse. In 2003-04, the US slowly woke up to the evident conclusion that it was only the Afghans themselves who, in the long run, could take the responsibility for the affairs of their country.

However, in spite of several efforts, like the London Compact, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy and International Conference in support of Afghanistan in Paris in June 2008, the approach to state building and development in Afghanistan still suffers from the lack of a rational and cohesive international assistance strategy. Focus has been on putting benchmarks and conditions on the government, while the international donor community is as far as ever from the lofty words in the Paris Declaration from 2005 about collective effectiveness, coordination and ownership of partner countries.

The conditions on the ground have deteriorated considerably, above all through the powerful revival of the Taliban insurgency and the subsequent civilian losses caused by both parties in the war. The continued influence by warlords and commanders, who in many cases are still occupying government posts at central and local levels, increasing criminality, and the growing corruption, fed mainly by the illegal drug industry, are causing dismal conditions for the great majority of people, and are further diminishing the possibilities of the state to develop and expand its authority and legitimacy. Significant examples are that a

majority of the Afghans prefer to use traditional sharia courts instead of the state judiciary and that, during the month of Ramadan in September 2008, in many mosques in Kabul itself the mullahs were preaching openly against the government and the presence of foreign military forces. Not until 2007 did the government decide to make a more consistent effort with regard to local governance, without which any state building process will stay on the paper where it is written.

Another unhelpful development, which is mainly outside the control of the state, is the rapid increase of costs for food and other essential commodities which, in many cases, have doubled and even more than doubled during the last year. In addition, a lingering drought – mainly in the northern parts of the country – has resulted in that 2008 saw the smallest wheat harvest in years and that serious food insecurity is threatening in big parts of the country.

The Conflict

Nearly 1,500 civilians were killed during the first eight months of 2008 which is close to 40 percent up compared to the same period in 2007. In August alone, 330 civilians were killed which is highest monthly civilian death toll since the end of the initial war against the Taliban regime in the autumn of 2001.

The insurgents continue to grow stronger. During the last two to three years, they have consolidated their hold in many areas in the southern and eastern provinces and established basic administrations, including sharia courts. In the South, reports indicate that they quietly have abandoned their previous rigid rules like bans on television, music, cutting and shaving of beards, compulsory praying in the mosques, and that they are offering amnesty for government civil servants, soldiers and police who are willing to switch sides.

They have advanced rapidly into regions immediately south, east and north-east of Kabul, and their presence is felt also in the western provinces and to a lesser extent in the north, where they consist of minor and rather scattered groups. Preferred methods are, among others, hit-and-run attacks against Afghan police and sometimes international forces and Afghan army units, roadside

bombs and suicide bombers which are used with devastating results, often causing civilian losses, and harassment, threats, kidnappings and killings of government civil servants, community leaders who are opposing them, and sometimes aid workers. A new phenomenon during 2008 is a sharp increase in attacks on transport convoys carrying supplies for the foreign forces, also on main roads south and east of Kabul.

It is not a coherent movement, as it is often portrayed in media, but is composed of several political groups with the common overall goal to rid the country of foreign troops and the Karzai government. In the South, it is the more traditional Taliban led by Mullah Omar and the so-called Quetta shura. The Taliban in the eastern provinces appear to be dominated by the so-called Haqani group based in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) in Pakistan, which has closer links and often makes joint operations in Afghanistan with al-Qaida, other pan-Islamic jihadist groups, Pakistani Islamic militants and elements in the Pakistani army. In parts of the East and to some extent in the provinces immediately south of Kabul, Hezb-e Islami (Hekmatyar) is active.

There are also differences locally. Journalists, who have gained access to areas dominated by Taliban, report that in the southern provinces, the movement seems to be more organised and consolidated, while in the provinces where they are relatively new, it is more of a mosaic of different local groups which, although they have some degree of cooperation, often are competing for power and influence. Sometimes they are mixed up with criminally motivated elements.

Aid agencies working in these areas have experienced that so-called local Taliban (contrary to out-of-province Taliban and non-Afghan insurgents) to a certain degree have a more tolerant view with regard to development and humanitarian assistance carried out by NGOs, and that it is often possible to use the local communities and their representatives to get “permission” for different kinds of projects, including schools for girls and health care directed towards women and children.

The uprising has been able to develop and advance mainly due to three factors. Firstly, the weakness, inefficiency and corruption

within the emerging state, and secondly, the inability of the Afghan army, police and the international forces to take areas and then hold them, thus making it possible to move in with substantial development and humanitarian assistance. Thirdly, the insurgents' access to safe bases in FATA and hide-outs in the Pakistani provinces of the North-West Frontier Province and Baluchistan, which are all bordering Afghanistan.

The international military forces and, to some extent, the Afghan army are claimed to be efficient when involved in direct combat situations but are too few to do both fighting and holding areas. This overextension, together with the political concerns of suffering too high casualties among the international troops, is also the reason for the excessive use of air force and artillery which, in turn, cause big civilian losses. Consequently, the US administration has announced a "mini-surge" and will send an additional brigade⁹ to Afghanistan, expected to arrive in the beginning of 2009. A fair guess is that there will be more to come.

Most western analysts are today in agreement about that FATA has taken over Afghanistan's previous role of being the main safe haven for the international Islamic jihadi movement. Many also agree with the repeatedly expressed opinion of the Afghan Government that Pakistan, or at least the Pakistan military and especially its intelligence service, the ISI, is playing a double game – on the one hand declaring that it is allied with US in "the war against terrorism" but, on the other hand, actually lending support to Taliban and other groups waging war against the Afghan government. These opinions have obviously gained support within the US administration which is compelling Pakistan to make more concerted and serious efforts to terminate the safe bases of the Afghan insurgents, al-Qaida and other pan-Islamic jihadi groups in FATA. It is a game with high odds, partly because the militants in FATA are increasingly turning their guns against the Pakistani government, and partly because as long as the Afghan insurgents have access to safe bases in FATA, it will be very difficult, if not impossible, to defeat them.

⁹ One brigade consists of approximately 3,500 soldiers

At the same time, the nightmare scenario for the US and other western countries is that the fragile Pakistani state will collapse, and that Pakistani Islamic militants will gain control over the nuclear weapons in the country.

In Afghanistan, the overall result is that the hope and expectations, which dominated the political atmosphere after the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, now have been transformed into growing despair and pessimism. The public attitude towards the presence of the foreign troops is becoming increasingly negative, although opinion polls still show a slight majority in favour of them staying, the main argument being that without them, in spite of them being disliked, it would only be a matter of time before the government caves in and the Taliban take over.

In the rural areas dominated by the Taliban, it is not the majority of people who are agreeing with the politics and ideology of the insurgents. True, the Taliban represent a rudimentary and very conservative religious and political tradition which is genuinely Afghan, although it has been increasingly influenced by non-Afghan ideologies like wahhabism and international jihadism. On the other hand, Afghans have shown through history that they essentially are pragmatic people, mainly concerned with creating a livelihood which will allow them and their families to survive from one day to another, from one year to another. Consequently, there is no doubt whatsoever that the overwhelming majority of the Afghan people want to live in peace under secure and as predictable conditions as possible. In this fundamental wish, they are not different from any other people in the world.

However, when living under conditions characterised by war and unrest, they are not less pragmatic. In present day Afghanistan, in areas dominated by or with a heavy presence of the Taliban, where the alternative is sudden incursions of foreign and Afghan army troops followed by a temporary set-up of a government administration, which often is more corrupt than efficient, and which anyway soon will be rendered paralysed due to the return of the insurgents, the ordinary Afghan chooses to side or at least pretend to side with the Taliban. The reason is obvious: it is a question of survival and based on his knowledge and experience,

he simply does not trust the Afghan government and the international community and its military forces as a viable and sustainable alternative.

Thus, the incompetence and mistakes committed by the international community since 2001, in particular the US, its inability to agree on a common and sound assistance strategy, became one of the main factors causing the inefficiency, corruption and weaknesses in the emerging Afghan state which, in its turn, levelled the way for the revival and return of the Taliban insurgency.

The Future

All wars end. Either by the victory of one party and the defeat of the other, or through a negotiation in which the conflicting parties agree on a power sharing settlement. The second option could have been possible in Afghanistan if the conflict had been limited to domestic causes. However, it is not. For the US, the rest of the international community and, to some extent, for the Afghan government, it is not only a struggle about controlling Afghanistan but also an intrinsic part of the so called “global war on terror”. For the leadership of the insurgency, which is increasingly influenced by al-Qaida and other pan-Islamic jihadi groups, the uprising in Afghanistan is progressively more seen in the perspective of a global Jihad with links to Iraq, the Middle East, Central Asia, Kashmir and other countries and regions where Islam and Muslims are alleged to be under attack and oppression. Thus, it is likely that the conflict will continue until one of the parties is defeated.

In one sense it is simple. If present trends continue, i.e. a faulty state building process, an international assistance characterised rather by disarray than consistency and coordination, and an advancing and increasingly potent insurgency, it is a fair presumption that the international community sooner or later will take out its military forces.

Indeed, this is the expressed Taliban strategy, including statements from insurgency leaders and fighters that they are prepared to go on for several decades, counting on that public opinion in the western democracies will force governments to

withdraw, mainly due to increasing casualties among their troops. It seems as if this strategy at least has started to have an effect. In August 2008, the Netherlands and Canada, two countries where opinion polls show that a majority is against the war effort, announced that they will bring home their combat troops in 2010 and 2011 and instead focus on training the Afghan Army. In September, a senior British defence official declared that the present 8,000 soldiers in Afghanistan will be the “absolute ceiling” for Britain’s contribution to the NATO operation.

At the same time, the US Administration has announced a “mini-surge” which presumably will be increased during 2009 and 2010 and which probably will push back the insurgency to some extent. However, more soldiers will not solve the problem if the state is not developing in a functional way, and if the issue of the safe bases in FATA is not dealt with.

Of course, such a process will drag out over years to come, which brings us back to the Afghan state – whether it can develop functional systems for providing reasonable security and development to its citizens. There is a window which might stay open for some years to come: in order to achieve real progress, both Afghan leaders and the international community must make some really serious efforts to get their act together.

On the Afghan side it is above all a question of political maturity, courage and will, a rational comprehension of the need to give up individual, ethnic and other vested interests and actively seek a national gathering which is underlined by the insight that either we do this together or we go down together.

On the side of the international community it is first and foremost a question of living up to the Paris Declaration and giving precedence to needs which are genuinely felt and identified by the Afghan society, and stopping prioritising its own agendas and mandates. Together with the Afghan government and civil society, it needs to agree on a common strategy for development cooperation and state building, and a permanent coordination structure which obliges every donor and the Afghan government to take an unambiguous responsibility for the implementation of their specific parts.