

The Window of Opportunity for Peace Building Initiatives in Afghanistan

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Afghanistan's history over the last three decades has been about wars, invasions and conflict. Hopefully the coming three decades will be about building peace. There has to be no illusion about how long time it takes. Peace is not easy to build and is not built quickly. It is important to note that a good start has been made seven years ago. It is an effort that has never been made in Afghanistan in the past. This is also an effort that can not be repeated in the future.

Peace can not be built without being founded on the people, without enabling and empowering the Afghans in the villages and towns of Afghanistan. A famous quote from one of the United Nations documents says that violence is in the minds of people, and it is only there that peace can be built. In Afghanistan's case, it is going to be a long term process, it will take generations.

There have not been any arguments against the central role that the state has in building peace. The experience in Afghanistan will always remain a very strong argument, a very strong case in point, for the crucial role of the state in building peace. Today, the centrality of the state is very important in the peace process in Afghanistan. Twenty years ago, the dominant thinking was that peace was actually a local issue, it was in the villages that peace had to be found and where it had to be built. This view, while still relevant, is no longer the complete answer. Today the dominant view is that there is no local peace without national stability, and that national peace, in turn, is connected to factors that are international. If there is a problem in Nausad village of Shindand district of the Herat province, then there is problem in the whole of Afghanistan and the President of Afghanistan is justifiably troubled. If there is trouble in Afghanistan then there is trouble in Europe. It is this systemic and interconnected nature of peace which makes the state the only viable actor, and the only agent for enforcing change in the interest of peace.

If the intervention of the international community in Afghanistan is about one thing then it is, in my view, about institution building. Institutions have to be built in Afghanistan. The country can be secured with the troops that are there – maybe with additional troops, and terrorism can probably be defeated for the time being with such actions. But none of these objectives will be permanently achieved without having a viable state, a permanent state that depends on sustainable institutions.

The question is, what does Afghanistan need today, seven years after the intervention? Where does the country stand and which key elements are needed for the future?

Time is a key element. Afghanistan needs time. Peace building can not be done in a hurry. The Taliban have a famous saying, that they have time and the rest of the world has watches. We, the Afghan people, must have time as well, not only watches, and there are no reasons why it would not need time, it is a question of perception. The reality is that this sort of nation and peace building takes time in Afghanistan as it has taken time everywhere in the world.

The second element of what Afghanistan needs for the moment is protection. It needs protection for the people, protection in the villages, in the country including protection from the terrorism that comes from outside the country. If the people in the villages and districts do not feel safe, then agriculture can not work, institution building and political processes can not take place and the election next year that the whole country is looking forwards to will not work without protection. Such protection can only be provided by a state. But then Afghanistan as a nation needs protection, which is mainly outside state control for the time being, because Afghanistan's problems are not only internal issues, they are regional and international.

The third thing that Afghanistan needs is continued supply of resources. It needs continued economic assistance by the international community. This is good not just for the continued legitimacy for the international intervention, but also for strengthening the Afghan state's legitimacy. However, on the question of legitimacy of state the government has been clear. If the people in a province, a district or a city in Afghanistan

complain about President Karzai, or the Afghan state, or the Afghan police, for example, then it is just that: a complaint by the people. That is not a question of legitimacy of the political process or the legitimacy of the Afghan state. States do not have to perpetually, on a daily basis, gain legitimacy; legitimacy in a democracy is bestowed through elections. It is given once for a five-year period through the election and is then sustained through democratic institutions. You cannot have a daily referendum on the legitimacy of the state. So in terms of dealing with the Afghan state as a development partner, the international community must not have double standards. European governments or the way the political institutions in Europe work can not be judged in one way and then Afghanistan in another. But, of course, what remains crucial is the question of the ability of the government to deliver. That is why Afghanistan needs continued assistance in terms of resources.

Looking at the way forward, it is very likely that a positive scenario will develop in 2009 internationally, regionally and in Afghanistan. For obvious reasons the elections in the United States have to be pointed out. Barack Obama, who was elected next President, and the appointment of General Petraeus, bodes well because they are a good team. Obama has learnt all the lessons that can be learnt from President Bush's rule and his engagement in Afghanistan. He has some of the best advisors, like Barnett Rubin, in his team. One may not necessarily agree with him on all points but he is the best scholar on Afghanistan that the US has at this moment. Obama has got several things right already, which concern Pakistan and he has been very straight forward on that point. With Joe Biden, an informed and involved senator as Vice President, the team is positive news for Afghanistan's future. Based on discussions and signs that the world and Afghanistan have got from Washington so far, the prospect for future engagement seems positive.

Europe is inevitably going to follow suit. Europe's involvement in Afghanistan over the past seven years has been crucial, it has been critical. The most important difference that Afghanistan has had compared to Iraq was perhaps the European enthusiasm and strong engagement. With a person like President Obama in the

White House, this engagement will be strengthened and there are already positive signs, including the Nordic region, France and Britain, that this is happening.

Regionally the most obvious good news is about Pakistan. The civilian government, the engagement and dialogue that now exist between President Karzai and President Zardari and his team is a positive sign for development in the region. The way that President Karzai now talks about the Pakistani government is astonishingly positive in a way that has not been experienced for the last seven years. The challenge of course, is to what extent this new government can rein in the ISI and the army. Even if the new government in Pakistan fails with this task, there have already been at least some changes that are positive. The fact that the two huge provinces of NWFP and Baluchistan have changed governments and are now controlled by secular forces, that alone is big news. ISI and the army at least will have to give some concession.

When it comes to Iran and Russia, there is still work to be done.

India and China have a positive attitude to Afghanistan. India has always been positive, and even more during the past seven years. With the bombing of its embassy in Kabul, it is aware of the intensity of the threat. It has good relations with the United States, which can help.

China has been the largest investor till now. It invested in a multi-billion dollar copper mine project. That is going to draw in China economically, which is what Afghanistan really needs.

This was about the international side. Within Afghanistan there are things happening. With General Petraeus coming in, the creation of a Petraeus plan should be expected. But that plan would actually be an Afghan plan. It is a plan that has been going on for the last three years now and is exactly about reforming the institutions in Kabul, reforming the administration at provincial and district levels but most importantly about involving communities in the counter-terrorism effort. It has to be clarified that it is not about creating militias as the rumours have it. When General Petraeus visited Kabul, he was briefed by Minister Atmar and others on the idea of a district police and he had later

positive statements about this briefing. He was very supportive of the idea of involving communities in the counter-terrorism effort. Since it is General Petraeus saying it, it is certainly going to be accepted. Few would know that President Karzai has fought for this same plan for three years with ambassadors and leaders in European capitals and America. The plan is about involving communities, because there cannot be a victory in this war without them. Three years ago, President Karzai was not understood, he was not taken seriously, and in some circles even it was hinted that he was for creating militias.

The other good news is the recent reshuffle in the government which is an element of a wider plan of President Karzai. Minister Atmar, the new Minister of Interior, who will be responsible for appointing police, and Jelani Popal in the local governance office appointing governors, district governors, all local administrators, are both very good news. Minister Atmar and Jelani Popal are not alone to work on these issues, there is also Amrullah Saleh who is Director of the Intelligence Service. His department has been one of the most encouraging success stories and has prevented many terrorist attacks, of course together with the Ministry of Defence the capacity of which has grown immensely.

There are about eighty districts in Afghanistan that are affected by the Taliban now, and actions have to be taken urgently about this issue so that the elections can take place. These four ministers mentioned above will go out to the affected districts and organise a council of elders, “real” people, not people involved with the Taliban, not mullahs but civilian people and elders. They will be brought together to form a shura or a council at district level, and then asked to, apart from other things, bring forth young men, the number depending on the size and importance of the districts. These men will be included in the police force. The shura has to guarantee that they are not drug addicts, they are not involved with the Taliban or violators, and guarantee their good behaviour. These young men will be absorbed into the police force. Although not a full-length training, they will be given a short version of the training and a police uniform. They will be paid individually by the police force, not through a person in order to avoid personal patronage

from developing. And most importantly, they will be commanded by a commander from Kabul, a police, a professionally trained person.

Now, is there any problem with that? Some may see an expanded police presence in those districts as a problem. But this police force will in fact not just be a larger force, it will actually be a force that has the support of the community. Elders will be standing with them, and if anyone of them is killed by the Taliban, it practically antagonizes the whole district. That is one way of really building a resistance against the Taliban at community level. This plan made by President Hamid Karzai will be supported by General Petraeus.

The good scenario continues, because one thing that everyone has a consensus about is that the election must be carried out. It is impossible for Afghanistan to not have the next elections. Some are talking about organising another Loya Jirga to confirm the new mandate period of President Karzai, or maybe bring in someone else. That would not just be an enormous setback for Afghanistan, it would also be a really big shame for the country as a whole, and no one should allow that to happen since, the elections are actually possible to organise.

With the new security team that President Karzai has brought, with General Petraeus and additional US troops, with the strong American presence, and with a much revitalised European efforts, with, hopefully, a strong EUPOL¹¹ police trainer mission, Afghanistan will be able to have elections. When the elections take place, it is going to be a massive boost to the security environment.

On the reconstruction side, the Paris conference in July 2008 was a great success. It came right in the middle of a gloom that was spreading in Europe mainly, but also within Afghanistan. Everyone expected criticism, feet-dragging but these things did not happen; instead it was the first sign of a comeback. The only hindrance to the development process is the security situation, of course. But there are many positive signs among the negative

¹¹ EU Police Mission in Afghanistan

ones. Kabul will hopefully next spring have 24-hour electricity for the first time. It will not be electricity generated in Afghanistan but from the transmission lines from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan which are now being completed. Along with this there are also other construction works going on, such as streets and roads.

But the challenge of reconstruction remains. In 2009, the government and the international community have to provide, in addition to security, also reconstruction to the villages of Afghanistan. Another very important progress in Afghanistan is that for the first time since 2000, there has been a drop in the drug and heroin production.

All of these factors combined, for the first time there is progress in Afghanistan and there are high hopes for the coming year. This means that 2009 is inevitably going to be a better year than 2008. It is going to be the first time since 2005 when the trend will not be a down-spiral trend; it will be an upward trend.