

## US Signals Afghan Policy Shift

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By Ahmed Rashid

Paul Wolfowitz tells Ahmed Rashid of America's new initiative to take the lead in rebuilding Afghan society. America unveiled a major switch in its strategy in Afghanistan yesterday: instead of concentrating solely on the war on al-Qa'eda, it will now take a lead in the "nation-building" it shunned for months.

It is to press donor countries to fulfil the financial pledges they have already made to speed up reconstruction of the war-torn country and help President Hamid Karzai to stabilise it.

It is also dropping its opposition to the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force peacekeeping mission, both in size and scope, so that it can operate beyond Kabul, the capital.

The move away from a purely military approach is the most significant shift in the Bush administration's policy since the end of the war in Afghanistan, and will be welcomed by Britain, other European countries and the United Nations. Tony Blair has long stressed the importance of rebuilding Afghanistan.

Paul Wolfowitz, the US deputy secretary of defence, one of the leading hawks in the Bush administration, told The Daily Telegraph: "I do think increasingly our focus is shifting to training the Afghan national army, supporting ISAF, supporting reconstruction efforts - those kind of things that contribute to long-term stability.

"My biggest single concern is that the economic aid that was promised at the Tokyo conference, which I think is crucial not just for economic purposes but for political and security purposes, is just not coming through at the levels that were pledged."

The Tokyo conference in January pledged \$4.5 billion (£3 billion) in international aid for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, of which donor nations promised to give \$1.8 billion this year.

"The statistic I recall is that barely 30 per cent of what was promised for this year has been delivered," Mr Wolfowitz said. "Clearly there are major aspects of this that have implications not only for the daily welfare of people, but also for the general security situation."

This is the first time that a senior Defence Department official has defined the conflict in Afghanistan in more than military terms and combating al-Qa'eda.

Other Pentagon officers said they would be co-ordinating a major diplomatic initiative across the world in the weeks ahead to persuade wealthy donor countries to "deliver the money they had promised to Afghanistan as quickly as possible".

"I would like to see a much bigger effort made in rebuilding of infrastructure of transportation and communications in the country," Mr Wolfowitz said.

"Afghanistan can be a potentially enormously important trading route within the region which would bring enormous benefits and prosperity and give incentives to people not to fight and feud because they see the benefits coming from stability."

He made it clear that America would no longer block the expansion of ISAF to other cities beyond Kabul and suggested that ISAF forces could be increased in Kabul.

"We are looking very seriously at what might be done if we get more contributions to ISAF. There are some suggestions that expanding ISAF in Kabul might be a good thing also," he said.

The UN and Mr Karzai urged in January that ISAF should be expanded to five other Afghan cities. America opposed the idea, fearing that it would interfere in its war with al-Qa'eda.

At that time several European countries were willing to commit more troops, but now that America has dropped its opposition to ISAF's expansion, no European country is at present willing to donate additional peacekeepers to Afghanistan.

Until June, Britain led some 4,500 troops from 19 countries in peacekeeping duties in Kabul. Britain's lead role has now been taken over by Turkey, whose six-month mandate expires at the end of the year.

"The big obstacle remains that we are having difficulty finding someone to take over when the Turks leave," Mr Wolfowitz said. "At the moment the issue is sustaining ISAF first. Expanding it is valuable, but it cannot be the first priority."

The Pentagon is now examining several options, including how ISAF could develop mobile forces, a suggestion that was first mooted several months ago by Major-General Sir John McColl, the British general who led ISAF until June, and the UN special representative to Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi.

America does not provide peacekeepers to ISAF, although it contributes air power, transport and emergency evacuation for all ISAF forces in Kabul and is paying Turkey a significant sum for its troop contribution to ISAF.

Washington is also playing a lead role in helping build a new Afghan national army. However, experts have said it will not be very effective until America stops supporting and funding some of the warlords who are helping the US military find al-Qa'eda.

"I don't think in most parts of the country that the power of the warlords is a function of any support they get from us," said Mr Wolfowitz. "Obviously there are places where we are working with local forces in pursuing our own tasks and obviously they must benefit from that, but the real strength of the warlords comes from their local roots."

He suggested that warlord power would be gradually diminished as the new army was built and economic incentives were created. "If they [the warlords] want the economic benefits from economic assistance, then they have to co-operate in various ways.

"It is 23 years of civil war that brought us to this condition and it's not something you can reverse by snapping your fingers, as much as you would like to," he said.

He added that there were now no large concentrations of al-Qa'eda forces in Afghanistan and its threat was now "small numbers here and there - although there continue to be small numbers in lots of places". The US military now faced "a lot of difficult work to root out those groups".

Mr Wolfowitz also emphasised the danger of al-Qa'eda regrouping in Pakistan, although it was not the only country to which al-Qa'eda elements had fled.

"Pakistan is convenient in terms of those people who were in Afghanistan and convenient because there are large numbers of extremists in Pakistan itself," he said. "We are concerned about that and concerned about the stability of Pakistan over the long term."

How do you see the situation in Afghanistan ? There is a strong feeling amongst Afghans that the US is letting down on its commitments for helping the country revive.

Ans. There are some things I would like to see us doing better out there, but I do think it is important not to exaggerate the problem, not in the interest of protecting our reputation but because too much defeatist talk has a way of having harmful affect in itself. All the evidence supports that the situation in Afghanistan is vastly better than it was a year ago and it is not collapsing. There are problems here and there and some things are perhaps are getting worse, but a lot of other things are improving. It is important to keep some perspective.

Having said that I would say that my biggest single concern is that the economic aid which was promised at the Tokyo conference which I think is crucial not just for economic purposes but for political and security purposes is just not coming through at the levels that were pledged. I don't know all the reasons why, but I don't see any reason why that should be the case. The statistic I recall barely 30% of what was promised for this year has been delivered. Clearly there are major aspects of this that have implications not only for the daily welfare of people but also for the general security situation. I would like to see much bigger effort made in rebuilding of infrastructure of transportation and communications in the country. All you need to do is look at a map and that Afghanistan can be a potentially enormously important trading route within the region, an outlet for Central Asia to Pakistan and India, trading routes from Iran to Pakistan and that would bring enormous benefits to prosperity of people and give incentives to people not to fight and feud because they see the benefits coming from stability.

Does the US now support the expansion of the International Security Assistance Force to other cities?

Ans. We are looking very seriously at what might be done if we get more contributions to isaf. There are some suggestions expanding isaf in Kabul might be a good thing also. The big obstacle remains that we are having difficulty finding someone to take over when the Turks leave at the end of their six month period. At the moment the issue is sustaining isaf first, expanding it is valuable but it cant be the first priority. There are some benefits from using isaf in ways outside the capital, not necessarily as a permanent presence but as a way of providing some transitional security in places where it is needed.

The US is helping build the new Afghan army but there is a contradiction in terms in that the US is also still supporting some warlords to hunt down Al'Qaeda?

Ans. I don't think in most parts of the country that the power of the warlords is a function of any support they get from us. Obviously there are places where we are working with local forces in pursuing our own tasks and obviously they must benefit from that, but the real strength of the warlords comes from their local roots and their regional basis and the key to dealing with that is on the one hand developing more strength through the afghan national army for the central government to control them in limited ways as to what goes on. The second thing has got to be to create the economic incentives for warlords, if they want the economic benefits from economic assistance than (they) have to cooperate in various ways one of which probably is demobilization, although its not the only thing. I had a conversation with (General Rashid) Dostum and (Ustad) Mohaqiq when I was in Mazar-e-Sharif emphasizing the importance of not fighting with other factions and the need for stability and that economic assistance was going to come in. It wasn't explicitly put in terms of a deal but it's a simple fact that if the place is unstable, we are not going to be deliver aid and it's a message that has had a useful affect. There is no question that the whole country would be better off if there were fewer weapons around and less importance attached to people with armies. Its 23 years of civil war that bought us to this condition and its not something you can reverse by snapping your fingers as much as you would like to.

What is the threat posed by Al'Qaeda at present ?.

Ans. You don't see any of the large concentrations of hostile forces any longer. Its small numbers here and there although there continue to be small numbers in lots of places. The result is on the military side its a matter of a lot of difficult work to root out those groups where you can find them and clearly also those people are also trying to figure out ways to kill Americans by all kinds of means, so far largely unsuccessful but we have to continue to be careful about protecting our own forces. I do think increasingly our focus is shifting to training the Afghan national army, supporting ISAF, supporting reconstruction efforts those kind of things that contribute to long term stability. But I suspect we are going to find for sometime to come, people there some afghans and non-afghans who regard us as the enemy.

Is there a danger of AQ regrouping in Pakistan?

Ans. Clearly Pakistan has been one of the main places but by no means the only one, it's a long list of countries that AQ elements have fled to. Pakistan is convenient in terms of those people who were in Afghanistan and convenient because there are unfortunately large numbers of extremists in Pakistan itself. Yes we are concerned about that and concerned about the stability of that country over the long term but I don't see any place Pakistan or anywhere else where ASQ has the freedom to operate that they used to have in Afghanistan and that's a big change for the better.

Has the US set down markers for President Pervaiz Musharraf to ensure free and fair elections in October?

Ans. We have a very heavy agenda with Pakistan, preventing war with India is probably at the top of the list of the many visitors who are going there. Coordinating our activities with the war on terrorism is the second major priority obviously we are in the longer term we have a huge stake in political stability in that country and I believe that long term stability really does depend on democracy. When you try and frustrate the will of the people you have problems but obviously also the situation where given the inroads that the extremists have made in Pakistan over recent years, there is going to be a certain amount of political turbulence almost no matter what.

Is the US committed to not just damage control over Indo-Pakistan tensions but also a long-term strategy to get the two sides talking?

Ans. We have to be but nobody can underestimate the challenges of doing that I have been in discussions on this issue between the Indians and Pakistanis and sometimes it makes the Arab-Israeli arguments looks tame by comparison. But that analogy also suggests that things can change over time. If you would look at the long term prospects there has been progress over Fortunately I can say that the State Department has the real challenge here and we are in a supporting role. Certainly the administration is deeply aware of the significance and potential dangers of the Indo-Pakistani tension in a way that we appreciated, but not as fully before September 11. We have developed interests and understanding of those interests in that whole part of the world that go beyond anything that was imagined before September 10.

There are widespread suspicions that the Defense Department is dominating policy making in Washington at the expense of other arms of the US government.

Ans. Certainly that's not a perception here. The perception I have is that the President dominates policy its his policies and there is a lot of healthy debate that goes into formulating them which he encourages. But I think there is a great sense of cooperation with the SD. What makes for better journalism is when there is some degree of difference