ARTICLES

Afghanistan After the War Is peace possible?

The New Republic. March 28, 2013

By Ahmed Rashid

Will Afghanistan, which has been at war since 1978—thirty-four years, or a period longer than the two world wars and the intervening years combined—finally see a minimal kind of peace before American forces leave next year? Can the United States focus enough diplomatic energy to help generate a cease-fire and a political deal between Kabul, Islamabad, and the Taliban? Can America and its allies satisfy the wider region that includes Iran, Central Asia, India, China, and Russia, so that they do not start undermining Afghanistan's still uncertain future?

For many months now the American media has been obsessed with the timetable for a drawdown of some 100,000 American and NATO troops, and with whether the 350,000-strong Afghan army and police can hold the line on their own against the Taliban, and with how many troops the United States will leave behind after 2014 to train Afghan forces and run its counter-terrorism campaign.Despite the unpopularity of the war in the United States and the drain on tax dollars, the Pentagon naturally favors a long timetable, slowing down the troop withdrawals and keeping as many soldiers in country after 2014 as the White House will concede. The White House is fighting back. Last November the military's demands for troops beyond 2014 were in the thirty thousand range, and now they are in the ten thousand range, while the White House is more likely to agree to between three thousand and six thousand. In January, during his trip to Washington, President Karzai said that what matters is the magnitude of the American commitment to Afghanistan, not the troop numbers. 1

There is no doubt that the American military is suffering terribly. Last year more active duty American soldiers died as suicide victims than died in combat. Another twenty thousand soldiers were wounded. Those ailing from war-related mental problems run into the tens of thousands. In 2012 alone, more than sixty American and NATO troops were killed in insider attacks by fellow Afghan soldiers or policemen, which means that they cannot trust the very Afghans they have spent so many years training. It will take a generation to deal with the repercussions for the American military of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

So it is not surprising that for most Afghans, the delineation of America's and NATO's so-called "transition strategy" to Afghan forces looks increasingly like an exit strategy, as politicians and parliaments in home countries urge an ever-quicker evacuation. Afghans see the transition as a Western excuse to get out, rather than an effort to ensure Afghanistan's future as a democratic and peaceful country.

Sensible Afghans do recognize that the waning public support in the United States and Europe is owed not just to the recession in the West or to the length of the war, but also to the failure of the Afghan leadership to deliver on governance.2 Meanwhile the U. S. and NATO high commands issue bland "all is well" statements, ignoring the devastating Taliban attacks on military airports and bases, and the rising casualty toll.

The debate in Washington about troop numbers is misplaced. It has nothing to do with the major issues facing Afghanistan, which require a transition to a peace plan rather than an exit. The first part of such a plan is the urgent need for talks for a negotiated cease-fire between the Taliban, the United States, and the Afghan government, so that NATO troops can exit with dignity and the horrendous levels of violence can be reduced. Afghanistan cannot be stabilized by fighting to the very last day. And this first negotiation needs to be followed by further talks between the Taliban and Kabul over a political power-sharing arrangement that will enlarge the space for the cease-fire, integrate the Taliban into state structures, and produce an ultimate political agreement to end the conflict.

The second-most pressing issue is to ensure that President Karzai holds a relatively free and fair presidential election, which is scheduled for April 5, 2014. Anything less, or a repeat of the rigged election of 2009, could lead to a multi-dimensional civil war. Not surprisingly, there is massive mistrust of Karzai by the political opposition and the non-Pashtun ethnic groups in the north and west of the country. Karzai himself is a Pashtun,

as are the Taliban, and even though Karzai cannot run for a third term, he is expected to favor a candidate who will protect him and his family once he steps down as president. In 2009 the non-Pashtun ethnic groups felt that they had been swindled out of an honest election by Karzai, but they backed down from a major confrontation largely due to American pressure and persuasion. This time around they will not go gently if they lose as a result of rigging. As a precaution in a country that is already overwhelmed with weapons, the warlords are collecting men and guns to stake their claim in the elections. Already ethnic tensions in Afghanistan are at their worst since 2001; a fraudulent election can only worsen ethnic conflict.

The third thing that is required for a satisfactory outcome is to ensure that Pakistan, which gives sanctuary to the Taliban leadership, cooperates rather than sabotages the transition and the peace process, and allows the Taliban to hold talks with Kabul on their own terms rather than on terms that Pakistan may impose. Farther down the road is the need to ensure the promised international funding to keep the Afghan army paid and fed, and to allow economic-development work to continue. All these factors for success depend on multi-dimensional American diplomacy and not on its military strength—on a comprehensive political road map devised by the United States and that other players can support.

The good news is that as the 2014 deadline looms ever closer, all the major players are looking beyond that date and there has been a change of mood in favor of stability. For the first time, the United States, Europe, the Arab states, Pakistan, the Afghan government, and the Taliban all appear to want peace talks. Most importantly, the neighboring states (Pakistan, Iran, China, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan) and the powerful near-neighbors (Russia, India, Saudi Arabia) do not want to see a continuing war in Afghanistan that would destabilize the region further.

The secret talks that the United States conducted with the Taliban in Qatar for much of 2011 and early 2012 never reached fruition, owing to the divisions within the Obama administration on offering concessions to the Taliban. Obama gave the go-ahead for the talks, but he never asserted himself when the Pentagon and the CIA refused to play ball, thereby stranding the State Department. (Senior American officials have told me this.) Any concessions that State wanted to give the Taliban were undermined by the Pentagon. But now, according to American officials, all the departments of the American government agree on the need for talks. Karzai and Obama have agreed to the Taliban request to open an office in Qatar. That is a major step forward, because it brings the Taliban out of the shadows and puts pressure on them to come up with a negotiating strategy.

There have been productive meetings recently between representatives of the Taliban and the Kabul government's High Peace Council in Tokyo, London, Paris, and several locations in the Persian Gulf. But these remained talks about talks, not substantive negotiations. Last year the Kabul government was also divided on talking to the Taliban; several cabinet members tried to sabotage talks or influence Karzai in the wrong direction. True to form, Karzai was both adamant and ambivalent about the need for talks. Now he appears to be more fully behind the idea. The recent Karzai-bashings in the American media may be justified because of his constant mood swings and dithering on important political decisions, but press profiles will not change the reality that he occupies the seat of the presidency and that American diplomats have to deal with him.

There has also occurred a more important breakthrough: leaders of the minority ethnic groups in the north and the west who fought the Taliban in the 1990s and vehemently opposed all talks with the Taliban have now become more amenable. At a meeting in Paris in late December, organized by French intelligence, the Taliban held their first-ever productive dialogue with the northern warlords. Moreover, Pakistan's military and its all-powerful Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), which have allowed the Taliban to mobilize resources for its war against the Americans from Pakistani soil for a decade, also appear to have changed their attitude. The Pakistan military now says that ending extremism in Pakistan is its main aim, rather than opposing India or trying to exert influence in Afghanistan. As such it supports all peace talks and initiatives taken by anyone.

The ISI is in the process of freeing some one hundred Taliban whom it earlier jailed, either for maintaining secret contacts with Kabul, the United Nations, and the Americans, or simply for refusing to dance to the ISI's tune. Most of these Taliban are so-called moderates who support an end to the war. Now the same ISI is pushing these freed Taliban to renew their contacts and discuss peace with their adversary. Despite continuing points of tension between the two countries, Kabul and Islamabad are finally cooperating rather than abusing each other. The military is now fully behind allowing the Taliban to open an office in Doha and will back Karzai in any initiative he takes.

As a consequence, there is also a vastly improved U. S.-Pakistan relationship, which broke down last year when a series of incidents, including the American raid to kill Osama bin Laden, snapped the relationship cold.

(Pakistan has yet to explain the presence of bin Laden on its soil.) The United States, Pakistan, and Afghanistan have created a "core group" that meets regularly to discuss all aspects of the peace process, from deciding which passports Taliban officials should travel on to assembling regional countries for a regional agreement on non-interference in Afghanistan. Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have important roles in supporting various initiatives taken by the "core group" players. Qatar will allow the Taliban to open an office, Turkey is the hub for talks on stabilizing the region, and the Saudis offer an important venue steeped in religious significance for informal talks.

But again, we need to be clear: these are still talks about talks. Real negotiations have yet to start. The United States is still not decisively in the picture by offering timelines and a road map for talks, and there will be no substantial movement without American participation and goal-setting. Moreover, international and domestic pressure on Karzai to hold a free and fair election has so far failed to make his intentions more transparent or to speed up the preparations for the elections. Indeed, there is almost no international pressure on Karzai to do so. He is contesting every detail of the proposed preparations for a fair election. While the Independent Election Commission, charged with holding the elections, says that voters need new identity cards, Karzai insisted that the ones used in 2009 should be used again—even though there was rampant fraud around those cards. The Americans and the Europeans are at fault for allowing Karzai to eliminate any role for the United Nations or any other outside body in the forthcoming elections, which will take place in the midst of the American-NATO troop withdrawal, leaving little military leverage to exercise and little interest in home capitals for any reason to delay an exit.

The scenario that I have just painted is probably the most positive on the horizon. But it is hardly the only scenario imaginable. There are plausible gloom-and-doom predictions about a slide into political chaos when the Americans leave and the Afghan army is pushed into a "fortress Kabul" strategy, as the Taliban re-take the countryside, worsening ethnic conflict, and neighboring states arm their Afghan proxies, and a refugee crisis ensues as millions of Afghans again flee their country. There is already an exodus of educated Afghans who fear the worst, and there is also massive capital flight. The war continues with the Taliban's wanton killing of Afghan civilians, the assassination of government officials, and the brazen multiple suicide attacks on American bases. The present Afghan situation is intensely dangerous and sobering. And Pakistan, which is crucial to any peace process, is itself in a state of meltdown beset by terrorism and bad governance.

For the positive scenario to bear fruit, therefore, the second Obama administration will have to muster the diplomatic resources, the energy, and the political will to push ahead with a comprehensive political settlement, internally and externally, that satisfies the bare minimum for everyone. Such determination on the part of Obama is by no means a foregone conclusion. Will crises in Iran, Syria, and Mali, and elsewhere eat up the diplomatic and foreign policy oxygen in Obama's second term? The U. S. has promised to contribute at least $2 billion a year for five years to maintain the Afghan army and $2 billion a year for five years for development. But recently congressmen and senators from both sides of the aisle have told me that their voters will not tolerate a single dime more to go to Afghanistan after 2014, despite any international commitments the Obama administration may have made to NATO and its allies. Karzai's recent tirade has not helped matters, and Senator Lindsey Graham, who has been deeply involved in Afghan policy, remarked recently that "I am perfectly capable of pulling the plug on Afghanistan."

With decision time on Afghanistan now at hand, it is a good moment to reflect on what has gone wrong, and on the historical mistakes that should not be repeated. Those are among the themes of this important new book by Barnett Rubin, the great American scholar and veteran of all things Afghanistan. Rubin's book is a compilation of his best essays on Afghanistan and the region, beginning in 1996 and ending in 2009, when he joined the State Department as an adviser to Richard Holbrooke and worked on the peace process with the Taliban. Rubin's involvement with the country goes back to the mid-1980s, which is when I first met him. I should disclose that I know him well: it is not possible to avoid the infinitesimally small pool of scholars and journalists who have had a long-term interest in this country. This pool shrunk to about half a dozen people worldwide during the mid-1990s, after the Americans walked away and the Taliban ruled Afghanistan; but Rubin was one of those who remained—writing, traveling the country, trying (futilely) to help various peace processes between the Taliban and the Northern Alliance.

Some of Rubin's most revealing writing in this book comes in the short links that he creates to connect his scholarly essays and the different sections of the volume. Here he emerges as an activist-scholar on Afghanistan; or as an adviser to the United Nations after September 11; or offering advice to warlords, government, and aid agencies; and finally to the American government before 2009. In one such passage, Rubin describes how, just days after September 11, Richard Haass, then head of Policy Planning at the State

Department, called the first meeting of experts on what the United States should do once the Taliban had been overthrown in Afghanistan. The Bush administration still had no war plan, let alone a postwar plan;3 the military and intelligence services had no up-to-date maps or detailed knowledge about the countryside; expertise in the CIA or the Pentagon on the ethnic groups, the tribes, and the structures of Afghan society—now torn apart by so many wars—was thin on the ground. By 2001, the civil war in Afghanistan had been raging for twelve years since the Soviets left, but there were very few people, inside or outside the American government, who had kept up with the running details of the Taliban regime. Afghanistan was hardly on anyone's agenda.

Rubin was the only activist-scholar present who represented the entire weight of scholarship on Afghanistan at American universities and think tanks. In those days anyone who worked deeply on Afghanistan was also an activist, in that we all supported or were actively involved in one or all concurrent peace-building processes—trying to get the Taliban and the opposition Northern Alliance to talk to one another, attempting to push an economic aid program for the Afghans through Congress or Europe's parliaments, trying to offer solutions to the burgeoning drug trade, attempting to persuade Pakistan and Saudi Arabia to see the dangers in their support for the Taliban. There were so few people working on Afghanistan, and so few governments interested in making peace and re-building what was already a failed state, that if you studied or wrote or reported as a journalist about Afghanistan, you automatically became an ad-hoc helper, peace promoter, women's rights lobbyist, and so on.

Before September 11, Rubin had been always at the forefront of these efforts, keeping in touch with everyone, organizing petitions, lobbying parliaments or the American administration, organizing meetings and conferences where sensible Afghan voices could be heard, raising funds for projects or encouraging European colleagues to speak up. When Lakhdar Brahimi, who headed the United Nations Assistance Mission for Afghanistan from 1997 to 1999, wanted to take the unusual step of putting together a team of experts to advise him, Rubin was put in charge of finding the right people and leading the group.4 He played the same role when the U. N. and Brahimi needed experts after September 11. In the midst of all this he did not forget his primary pursuit, which is scholarly writing.

Rubin's activism was very different from the kind of scholarly activism from American intellectuals that General David Petraeus promoted, first in Iraq and then in Afghanistan. Starting with the embedding of journalists in the first Iraq war, which is still an intensely controversial issue, the second war in Iraq and later in Afghanistan saw the American military recruiting scholars and think tank experts to embed them in the military for much longer periods and then ask them to give an assessment of the war. Such placement limits scholars enormously, in that they are expected to point out how to improve the military's war-fighting capacity and not to deepen the military's knowledge about peace processes, ethnic and tribal groups, curbing drug trafficking, talking to the Taliban, or exposing corruption and money laundering by all parties, including the Americans. The spin-offs for the military are enormous—glowing op-ed pieces in the American media, scholarly lectures to skeptical audiences, and a wide-ranging PR effort that military officers could not match. These scholars have helped to expand the war because they refuse to consider political solutions; they keep the debate in Washington stuck on issues of troop numbers rather than a broader debate on how to find a peace.

When he commanded the U. S. Central Command in Tampa, and later U. S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan, Petraeus never assembled scholars to advise him on how to open talks with the Taliban. In fact the military led the charge in repeatedly undermining such an effort when the State Department conducted open talks with the Taliban in 2011. And so Obama has had to deal constantly with military questions rather than with the political issues that urgently need a hearing.

All of this is quite different from embedding scholars with the American military and civilian effort in Afghanistan in order to better understand the country itself, which is not a bad idea. It was promoted heavily by the late Richard Holbrooke, who enlisted social scientists, anthropologists, agronomists, and scholars of many different academic disciplines to help the political and economic peace-building effort in Afghanistan by offering a better understanding of Afghan society. Mostly such scholars have remained out of the media spotlight, and have avoided supporting one faction or another in the American government, and provided invaluable research. (It is interesting to note that armies that refuse to seek outside opinions end up at a dead end. Pakistan's generals are the best example—ostracizing and harassing and punishing those intellectuals who hold opposing views to their own on how to conduct Pakistan's war on terrorism. The ISI keeps a ruthless grip on the media and all opinion-making in the country when it comes to India and Afghanistan and the military itself. Dissenting voices are barred from lecturing at Pakistan's military colleges, and those TV anchors on the ISI payroll restrict such voices from the media, too. The consequences of this myopic vision can be clearly seen

in the worsening chaos in Pakistan, perpetrated in part by the military's ignorance and outdated assumptions.)

Under Petraeus's command, the American military in Afghanistan rolled out many new tactical responses to the Taliban and to problems of governance, but there was no strategic relationship among the tactical actions. The management of events constantly overwhelmed the broader policy. I have long felt that the military's understanding and success could have improved dramatically if it had faithfully and completely applied the counter-insurgency manual written partly by General Petraeus, which made securing the people rather than killing the enemy the main aim. This strategy was implemented by General McChrystal in Afghanistan for a short time, but it was abandoned, ironically enough, by Petraeus himself when he took command, as he preferred a more muscular policy.

Rubin's contribution to advising the United Nations, the United States, and other governments has always been about how to bring peace to Afghanistan and its warring factions, and more recently how to use the American-led war effort as leverage to establish talks with the Taliban. For starters, he says, the Taliban need to be accurately perceived. "The Taliban," he writes, "like their opponents, are thus not throwbacks to medieval times but actors in today's global economy and society. For the first time in history, ulama dominate political and military life in Afghanistan because of geopolitics and resources made available by globalization." This is not meant as an extenuation of any kind. Like all honest observers of the Taliban, Rubin is clear about the tactics of terror that the Taliban have used to cow the population and to force people to side with them. The Taliban are not liked by the Afghan people, they are feared by them; and Rubin does not forget that.

In the 1990s and afterward, Rubin in these essays gave prescient warnings—that by ignoring Afghanistan, the United States was setting itself up for something far worse; that the civil war was being transformed into a transnational regional war due to the involvement of Afghanistan's neighbors, and to the world's inaction; that the refusal to carry out nation-building after September 11 would lead to increased insecurity and the return of the Taliban; and that the failure to see the region as a whole would lead to a gathering storm with Pakistan and other neighbors. He writes that after September 11 he "had seen no recognition by the [Bush] administration that Afghanistan was a nation, not just a terrorist base":

The discussions ... were all oriented around how to assemble a coalition to eliminate al-Qaida and topple the Taliban, not how to build a stable Afghanistan that would give Afghans ... and their neighbors ... a real stake in guaranteeing that such threats would not return.

In the decade after September 11, Rubin would search in vain for American policymakers who saw the need to build a stable Afghanistan.

These essays also tackle the larger issues related to nation-building around the world and compare them to those in Afghanistan. Rubin confronts the notion, popular in the 1990s, that humanitarian aid could serve as an alternative to nation-building in the Balkans and Afghanistan: "Political and strategic stakes were unclear, and humanitarianism emerged as an all-around response to state collapse, ethnic conflict, and other such problems. Such an approach failed in Afghanistan, as it did in Bosnia, Somalia, and elsewhere." Similarly, stability in Afghanistan will come about only by addressing the region as a whole. "A more challenging alternative would be to consider peacemaking in Afghanistan as part of a larger problem, of transforming the political economy of a region," Rubin observes.

Rubin also discusses in detail the nature of the Afghan political system. He remarks that in its recent history Afghanistan has been ruled but not governed, and the present arrangement of Western troops backing a corrupt Afghan regime and former warlords has not produced the necessary state-building results or the necessary legitimacy. "Above all," he remarks, "the crisis of human security in Afghanistan is due to the destruction of institutions of legitimate governance. It is as much an institutional emergency as a humanitarian one." After September 11, the American refusal to deploy sufficient numbers of troops to Afghanistan to maintain security led to the re-empowering of the warlords, which ensured that Afghanistan could not build the institutions of governance that it required. Rubin skillfully and comprehensively discusses the issues of democracy, centralization versus the devolution of power to the provinces, and ethnicity and tribalism, and concludes that the Afghans have so far achieved only what he calls "a diffuse legitimacy."

This diffuse legitimacy is not yet supported by legitimacy based on performance, as the delivery of public services falls far short of popular demands and expectations. Reinforcing the state's legitimacy faces a daunting contradiction and is interrelated with all other aspects of state-building. Without steps to eliminate the narcotics trade ... the government cannot implement the rule of law, diminish corruption, gain control

over its local appointees, and curb illicit power holders. Yet the state cannot increase its legitimacy while destroying nearly half of the country's economy [the drug trade] with foreign military assistance.

The American refusal to deal with the drug trade right after 2001, and its subsequent failure to build up the Afghan civil service and judiciary, and its long delay in building an Afghan army and helping to create an indigenous economy that is not dependent on the vast sums of money coming in for American forces—all this only reinforced the Afghan crisis of legitimacy. How Afghanistan ends for the United States will depend on how willing Obama is to use his foreign policy capital to push for a comprehensive settlement with the Taliban and neighboring states. Anything less will mean a fourth decade of war and the return of Al Qaeda.

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