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The war in Afghanistan is now the longest war in living memory. It has been a 30-year war for the Afghan people and a nine-year war for the West. And there is enormous reluctance to go on indefinitely. One conclusion of the London conference which was held a few weeks ago with 60 countries participating was that all the countries agreed that they would start talking to the Taliban. Countries that were very reluctant even six months ago now agree that there is no other way to bring about a conclusion to the conflict. This change in stance follows President Barack Obama's deadline of June 2011 for the start of an American withdrawal from Afghanistan and for the handing over of responsibility to the Afghan Government.

However, this new approach raises the concern that the West is once again preparing to abandon the region and, thus, abandon the achievements of the last nine years in areas such as women's rights and education. The question being asked is 'does talking to the Taliban mean the West would tolerate a return to the Taliban's vision of Islamic law in Afghanistan?' Furthermore, what are these developments going to do to the image of American pre-eminence in the world? In the following discussion I will consider these questions, as they relate to the present situation in Afghanistan.

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So what is the present situation? Firstly, there is the resurgence of the Taliban. As is well known, the Taliban were rapidly defeated militarily in 2001. While up to 15,000 Taliban were killed at this time, most leaders managed to escape into Pakistan. Over the next two years the survivors rebuilt the movement which became active again in 2003. Taliban membership is predominately drawn from the Pashtun ethnic group which primarily lives in the South and the East of Afghanistan. However, today they are a country-wide movement; there are also Taliban groups in the North and in the West of the country. Further, the Taliban have become more than just an Afghan phenomenon; they are now a regional phenomenon, with Taliban groups active in Pakistan and a number of areas throughout Central Asia.

This period of Taliban resurgence has been coupled with the development of links with Al-Qaeda. As is well known, Al-Qaeda has become in the years since 9/11 an organisation with a global reach. Current estimates suggest Al-Qaeda have contacts in almost every European country as well as extensive networks throughout the Middle East – particularly Iraq, Jordan and Yemen – and North Africa. Importantly, Al-Qaeda's leadership lives along the Pakistan/Afghanistan border, and therefore have maintained an alliance with the Pakistani Taliban and the Afghan Taliban. This relationship poses a very serious security problem in the region.

Secondly, there is the issue of the Afghan government and the role of President Hamid Karzai. Elections have been held and a constitution put in place, but despite these developments there is enormous disillusionment in Western foreign-policy circles about Karzai's leadership. In particular there is concern regarding his inability to institute better governance practices, to curb corruption, or to halt the production of drugs in the country. The 2009 presidential election revealed the scale of the failure with the final result being widely perceived as fraudulent. The election outcome and the resulting public outcry seemingly caught many of the Western diplomatic community by surprise and have substantially undermined the credibility of Afghan government institutions.

Thirdly, there is the regional problem. There has been an increasing acknowledgement in the last two years that the conflict in Afghanistan cannot be treated in isolation. Afghanistan is a land-locked country with six direct neighbours and half a dozen near-neighbours that are very influential. It is now commonly understood that peace in Afghanistan will only come with a regional agreement restraining foreign intervention. This conclusion has its basis in the experience of the 1990s when the US withdrew its influence from Afghanistan after the Soviet military withdrawal, which led to increased intervention from other regional powers,

particularly Pakistan. A continuation of this kind of interference in Afghanistan has contributed to the ongoing instability of the country and the region.

Despite this very depressing picture of the current situation, recent polling data on Afghans' political preferences conducted by the BBC indicates that only 6 % of Afghans want the Taliban back. Although it is extremely difficult to conduct polls in the middle of a war, there is no reason to presume this figure to be inaccurate. It is certainly clear that a majority of Afghans do not want the Taliban to return to power, since they know that the Taliban cannot provide development, jobs, education – anything that would develop an Afghan economy. They also know that the return of the Taliban would invariably lead to a renewal of the civil war with the Northern Alliance.

The population's lack of support for the Taliban is tempered with frustration with the West for failing to provide sufficient resources for development in Afghanistan. What support remains for the Taliban is due, at least in part, to anger and frustration at American and Western policies. But that does not mean that Taliban are popular. This resentment at Western policies has not translated into a popular uprising against the presence of foreign troops as it did in Iraq in 2005-2006. It is still a widely-held view among the Afghan people that the presence of foreign troops in Afghanistan is the only guarantee that the Taliban will not return and that there will be the prospect of foreign investment in the economy. So, in Afghanistan there is currently a dire military situation, a quite dire Afghan government situation, all set within a very dire regional situation, but also enormous hope (I dare use the word) that things can improve.

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How did Afghanistan get to this terrible position after the events of 2001? The answer can be summarized in one word - Iraq. Iraq has been a huge diversion of Western resources and focus since 2003. The Iraq war has not only drained resources that could have aided Afghanistan, but the conduct of the war has created tensions between the Muslim world and the West, while increasing the status and profile of Al-Qaeda and related militant groups. These developments led to the deprioritization of Afghanistan in Western strategic policy, which resulted in a failure to make the required investments in the infrastructure of the country which are needed to advance the development and wellbeing of the Afghan people.

This problem was exacerbated by the policies of a US administration which had a limited vision for progress in Afghanistan. There effectively was no strategic vision or plan for 'nation-building'. Afghanistan is a poor country, so a rebuilding plan is not going to turn it into a European-style nation, but there was not even a plan to attempt to rebuild the country to its level before 1979, prior to the Soviet invasion. Before the past 30 years of conflict, Afghanistan had a functioning economy; it was self-sufficient, it had a basic infrastructure such as electricity in the cities, and it had a thriving agricultural sector which provided export revenues. However, in the nine years since the defeat of the Taliban, Western investment has not been able to raise development conditions even to their pre-1979 levels. Given the level of expenditure of Western forces and the lives of the soldiers that have been lost, the failure is a sad indictment of the West's policy.

Rather than focusing on development there has been an obsession, particularly from the Americans, with the Afghan electoral process. The concept of nation-building and the idea of building up the economy, social institutions and infrastructure have largely come second in order of priority to the institution of an electoral process. In hindsight, the emphasis on making Afghanistan appear to be a democracy was set far too early, before there were enough solid building blocks inside the country that could have sustained this political process. For example, when presidential elections were held in 2004, half the population did not even know what an election was, given that they were not alive when the last election was held in the 1960s. But despite these obvious limitations there has been continued pressure to hold elections. Thus we had the recent presidential election, which in retrospect should not have been conducted at that time. Given the military situation, the idea that a successful election could be held in the midst of an insurgency, with an urban bombing campaign and suicide attacks, was extremely far-fetched. It seems, therefore, that political strategy in Afghanistan has been hampered by a poor ordering of priorities, leading to the commitment of resources to supporting of a superficial political structure in a country which has not yet come out of war.

Finally, there has been the issue of intervention of NATO in 2005-06 and the lack of foresight that appears to have gone into the planning and execution of that mission. Again, this failure has been influenced by events in Iraq. Countries that were reluctant to commit military support to the Coalition in Iraq generally showed more

willingness to become involved in Afghanistan. But the lack of adequate intelligence, combined with insufficient preparation, has severely compromised the effectiveness of the countries involved in the operation. The British, for example, deployed to Helmand province with little local knowledge and without expecting the kind of resistance that they have subsequently encountered.

These difficulties have been coupled with reluctance to provide sufficient resources for the building of Afghan institutions, in particular the army, the police, and the justice system. It is only in the last two to three years that we have seen substantive investment in building up the army and police. However, this shift in strategy regarding the development of institutions is being rushed. For example, the target for training a new Afghan army from scratch is 18 months. This timetable faces considerable challenges. The army is currently approximately 100,000 strong, but only some 10 or 15 % of those recruits are literate. Moreover, there is wide-spread drug usage by soldiers and police due to the pre-eminence of drug cultivation in the national economy. Developing an effective and disciplined military under these conditions is extremely difficult, if not unrealistic, given the proposed timeframe.

There has, however, been considerable success in the development of the education and health sectors. Afghanistan in 1979 did not have an education system, but now nearly six million Afghan children attend school. Approximately 40 % of these children are girls. However, the educational infrastructure remains incomplete. Since there is no Afghan economy that can sustain an educated group of 3-5 million children, the first cohort of these children, who have been in education for 8 years now, are finishing their education with no prospect of either attending university or of finding suitable employment.. So again we are looking at problems ahead that will be very detrimental.

These problems have dominated the situation in Afghanistan over the last nine years. However, there have been some changes since the election of President Obama. Principally, we have seen over the last year the development of a regional strategy. The NATO countries have recognised that they need to bring the neighbouring countries together to create a coherent strategy for the development of a stable Afghanistan. This new approach has became a major plank for Obama, as indicated in a speech he made in March 2009 when he announced the deployment of a further 20,000 troops. This increase in troop numbers has been coupled with a substantial increase in investment aimed at building up Afghan institutions.

Alongside increased troop numbers, there has also apparently been recognition among Western governments that a viable economy, not a donor-driven economy, is a key to future stability. And the key to developing a functioning economy is investment in agriculture. This is a policy that I have personally advocated since 2001. It is important to recognise that Afghanistan is 70-80 % rural and, therefore, the most effective way to undercut the power of Taliban and the local warlords is to develop an agriculture sector that will encourage fighters (along with the five million refugees of the war) to return to the land. The delay in adopting a strong plan for agricultural development has been a serious deficiency in the Western plan for the country. Only 12 % of Afghanistan's territory is arable, the rest is desert or mountainous. Therefore agricultural production is concentrated in the river valleys. It is an oasis economy, which means that it is comparatively easy to develop a basic level of sustainable agricultural production because resources can be effectively focused on the small number of areas where intensive agricultural production is possible. Helmand valley is an example of one such region. It is only in the last year that the first serious investment in agriculture has begun.

There has been in the last year, then, recognition of three key issues: the regional problem, the lack of functioning institutions, and the underinvestment in economic development. Recognition of these three problems has come alongside public acknowledgment – long denied by George W. Bush and Tony Blair – that Taliban and Al-Qaeda leadership are living in Pakistan. This point has long been obscured, at least in part due to the relationship that existed between Bush and Pakistan's former President, General Pervez Musharraf. The availability of a sanctuary for the insurgency leadership has been a major impediment to implementing an effective counterinsurgency campaign. The safe havens in Pakistan have enabled the Taliban to maintain a supply of recruits, food, and weapons that have fuelled the insurgency over the past seven years. A similar problem was apparent during the Vietnam War, the ability of insurgents to maintain a sanctuary enabled effective resistance to US military force.

However, despite recognition of these issues, the problems are for the most part worse than they were at the start of Obama's presidency. The current poor state of progress in Afghanistan is due to the negative impact of a number of factors. These include the rise in tension between India and Pakistan in the wake of the attacks in Mumbai; the deterioration in relations between the US and Iran; the increasing tension between China and the US; and also the poor state of the relationship between Russia and NATO after the conflict in

Georgia. In summation, the regional problem has not been addressed, and has in fact has become substantially more complicated in the past year.

A further complicating factor has been the growing use of suicide bombers as a tactic in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. This is a concerning development. Afghans never previously used suicide bombers. It is a tactic that has developed under Al-Qaeda guidance, using experience gained in other Middle Eastern countries and only recently employed in Afghanistan. This tactic was never employed against the Soviets and was never used during the subsequent civil war.

In response, the US military, building on its experience in Iraq, has developed a "people-centric" counterinsurgency strategy. The strategy attempts to clear population centres of insurgents, and then hold those areas with troops to provide security and stability. This, in turn, is supposed to enable the relevant government agencies and NGOs to provide services to the Afghan population. This is a sensible strategic approach. However, despite the recent surge in troop numbers of 30,000 additional American troops and 7,000 NATO troops, taking the total NATO/American contingent up to 160,000 by the middle of this year, troop numbers are not sufficient to secure the whole of Afghanistan. Furthermore, the 18-month timeframe for implementing this strategy raises doubts about whether this new approach will have sufficient time or resources to be successful. There is also a perception among Afghans and other countries in the region that NATO interest in the conflict is waning and that a Western withdrawal from Afghanistan may be imminent. This perception persists despite Obama stating very clearly that America is committed to a military role in Afghanistan and that there will not be a sudden withdrawal of American troops in June 2011. What reinforces the perception of Western fatigue is the clear decline in domestic support for the war in many of the countries with troops deployed in Afghanistan. In most European countries, 60-70 % of their publics now believe that their troops should come home. For example, in Germany, a key country with 4,500 troops in Afghanistan, 77 % of the public believes that their troops should come home. Even in the US support has declined sharply. For the first time in the nine-year war, American polls are showing that more than 50 % of Americans believe that their troops should come home. This level of negativity to the war will likely make long-term deployment of troops unsustainable for European governments seeking re-election.

These views are, of course relayed back to the Afghan people and the Taliban. Some among the Taliban believe that, given declining public support in the West for the war, the Americans and NATO will leave, and therefore all that is required for military success is to wait the Western forces out. This strategy requires only that the Taliban survive while continuing to inflict sufficient casualties to maintain the unpopular perception of the war amongst the domestic populations of the key Western nations.

Given these factors there is now considerable impetus to elaborate a plan that involves direct talks with representatives of the Taliban. This approach recognises that any future peace will have to acknowledge that, though the Taliban are a marginal element in relation to the Afghan population as a whole, they are representative of a section of the Pashtun people, which with approximately 38 % of the population form the largest ethnic group in the country. The Pashtuns have, to date, felt largely alienated by Western policies since 2001 and this situation will need to be addressed in any future settlement.

The Taliban established itself in the early 1990s on the basis of a three-point agenda. They sought to end the civil war, which was going on at that time, disarm the population, and impose Sharia law based on an extreme interpretation of Islam, developed from the teachings of the Deobandi sect of Sunni Islam. These initiatives were initially extremely popular. However, after their early success the limitations of their vision for the future of the country became apparent. The Taliban had no economic or social vision; they insisted that bringing in Sharia would resolve all of people's problems. They had no concept of what a functioning economy or education system required. These limitations are understandable given that the Taliban at that time was essentially a peasant army, fighting a peasant insurgency. Their principal appeal lay in the fact that the Afghan population were fed up with the status quo. The details of the Taliban's policies mattered little under these circumstances; what mattered was ending the instability caused by the civil war.

Since the Taliban's defeat in 2001 and their reconstitution in 2003 they have developed little from their origin as a peasant army with limited policy vision. The one area they have advanced in is in their military capabilities. The organisation has received training from Al-Qaeda, including training for some members in Iraq, which has vastly increased the efficiency and effectiveness of the insurgency. We have seen the consequences of this through the effective use of IEDs and the increased sophistication of the Taliban's tactics in conducting ambushes, suicide bombings, and acts of urban terrorism. However, the Taliban still cannot face Western forces directly in conventional combat. They are not able to take cities and they are not able to

mobilize masses of population against Western occupation and Western forces, so militarily they appear to have reached their zenith. They are extremely capable at their current form of insurgency; they can harass the population and harass Western forces to a considerable degree, but they cannot achieve a decisive military victory.

In sum, the Taliban is a sophisticated militarily organisation, but an extremely unsophisticated social and political entity. This combination poses a conundrum for the solution to the conflict. Their relative military sophistication means that the Taliban – as Western forces are increasingly acknowledging – cannot be militarily defeated. So the Taliban cannot win, but it also cannot be defeated. This recognition has provided impetus to the move to engage the Taliban in talks. However, if we look at other similar movements elsewhere in the world, such as Somalia, Yemen and Sudan, the respective Islamic militant groups in these countries are actually providing the people with social services alongside the security they attempt to impose militarily. The Taliban in contrast provide nothing in the way of social services and only a very limited form of 'justice', which they derive from their conception of Sharia law. Therefore, the political and social limitations of the Taliban make the political aims of engagement with the Taliban extremely unclear. As such, the Taliban is both an important component of a future peace, but also an apparent impediment to a coherent political vision for Afghanistan's future.

The Afghan government recently met with Taliban representatives in Saudi Arabia. These talks, however, were conducted amongst only a small group of Afghans representing a very narrow range of views on Afghanistan's future. Karzai relied on loyalists drawn from his own family to present the government's position at these talks, thereby inherently limiting the diversity of views that would be expressed. To be successful, and to avoid alienating substantial sectors of the Afghan population, future talks must be broadened to include non-Pashtuns, particularly as Karzai is himself a Pashtun. Any perception of the development of a Pashtun hegemony in Afghanistan would be extremely dangerous and likely spark an ethnic conflict rather than establish a stable peace.

There are other segments of Afghan society that also require consideration. In the nine years since the Taliban were defeated a small but influential middle class has developed in Kabul and some of the major cities. This middle class is comprised of many of the professional workers of Afghan society, and includes a substantial number of women who are the majority of teachers and health workers in the country. It is also supported by a strong group of NGOs that operate in the country. These elements now comprise a small but important movement towards a modern, developed Afghanistan which contrasts starkly with the vision presented by the Taliban. Naturally, these groups are fearful of moves to incorporate what they consider to be fundamentalist views into the political future of the country. In particular there is a strident women's movement that is raising questions about the West's support for the protection of woman's rights and continued access to education for all Afghan children. The gains made in these areas over the past nine years are fragile and there is justified concern that the West's withdrawal from Afghanistan could see even these few advances destroyed.

To incorporate the interests of all of these groups into the peace process is going to be a very complex process. This is even more evident when we consider the regional situation. Pakistan, which has supported the Taliban, will want to be involved in brokering any peace deal to ensure that the Taliban's interests are adequately represented in the eventual makeup of the Afghan government, even if they are not returned to their pre-2001 power. For Pakistan this consideration is critical for dealing with what they view as the threat of expanding Indian influence in Afghanistan.

There is also the issue of the Taliban's influence on Afghanistan's neighbours. For example, tensions between Iran and the Taliban remain high. Iran nearly invaded Afghanistan in the 1990s to remove the Taliban. Part of the tension lies in the fact that the Taliban are Sunni extremists, while the Iranian government are Shia. Iran has a large Sunni population which they fear could be influenced by the Taliban. These tensions have been exacerbated in recent months through Iran's increasing isolation from the West due to its nuclear policies. The fear of Taliban influence is prominent throughout Central Asia, with many states sharing ethnic affinities with the ethnic groups of Northern Afghanistan, such as the Tajiks, the Uzbeks, and the Turkmens. These groups would resist a deal that they perceived as giving undue influence to the Pashtuns and potentially reinstating Taliban influence on their borders.

India has been resisting engagement with the Taliban due to the latter's relationship with Pakistan and to India's belief that Afghanistan has been used as a training ground for militants who have subsequently conducted attacks in Kashmir. Kabul has become, in effect, the new Kashmir with the real conflict between India and Pakistan actually now being conducted inside Afghanistan. Considerable effort is required by the

West to bring India and Pakistan together to assist with the peace process. There are bitter rivalries being played out between the two nations which, unless this is concluded, will likely obstruct a stable peace agreement.

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In conclusion, since 2001, there has been an integration of many extremist elements into the Afghan government system. Many of the country's warlords have participated in elections and are now sitting in Parliament. This includes ex-Taliban commanders. These people are integrated at all levels of central and regional government. This reality comes from fact that Afghanistan is a tribal community, a clan community. Many in the West may view this as a negative, but I will end this discussion with a positive point that arises from this feature of Afghan society. As a tribal society, Afghanistan has an enormous absorptive capacity for forgiveness. The example of the Afghan government shows that, if done in the right way and in accordance with Afghan custom, the enemy can be brought into the peace process. The West is going to have to pursue a process of reintegration that will involve bringing Taliban commanders and foot soldiers into the fold, using incentives such as money, vocational training, and economic development. It is inevitable that we will have to seek some kind of dialogue with the Taliban and some kind of compromise in Afghanistan if we are to marginalize Al-Qaeda. Afghanistan's history shows that such a rapprochement is possible. There is, therefore, hope that a sustainable peace is achievable; people with deep histories of conflict can work together.

The end.