

ANALYSING US OBJECTIVES IN AFGHANISTAN: COUNTERING TERRORISM TO PROMOTING DEMOCRACY

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Introduction

Admittedly, Afghanistan's stability and prosperity determines regional stability and world peace. For a war-torn country, 'democratic development' is a great challenge facing the international community particularly, the United States. Decades of war, anarchy and autocratic rule have left no space for political structures and democratic institutions to grow. American efforts to bring stability and democracy in Afghanistan have not succeeded to date. It has remained unable to establish peace despite numerous measures taken from 2001 onwards. The challenges ahead loom large in the form of warlords and militias that must be demobilised, resurgent insurgency that needs to be countered and devastated economy that demands rehabilitation and development. However, there are some positive signs indeed; for instance, national pacts, elections and drafting of the constitution has raised hopes that

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democracy can flourish with the continued commitment of the international community, especially the United States.

How far the US has succeeded in bringing stability to the war-ravaged country? What are the challenges and prospects of democracy? To address these questions the paper evaluates the efforts made by the US administrations since 9/11 to eradicate terrorism, bring stability and to transform Afghanistan into a viable functioning democracy. The paper is divided into three broad sections. The first, "U-turn over Afghanistan," discusses the root causes of US policy shift and subsequent intervention in Afghanistan as well as the nature of US agenda. The second section, "Towards stabilization and promoting democracy" discusses the measures that the US has taken so far to combat terrorism, bring stability and democracy to the country and the third section highlights key challenges that the US is facing as well as the prospects of democracy in Afghanistan.

U-turn over Afghanistan

Long before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan the US had been nursing ambitions to bring this region under its influence to promote its strategic and economic interests. On its part the Soviet Union was well aware of these covert intentions which were exposed when the US actually tried to topple the pro-Soviet regime of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan. To foil US strategic planning and to keep the country under its own influence, the Soviet Union in 1979 invaded Afghanistan. The US escalated the covert operations which had already been taking place. It adopted coercive policies against the PDP government and spread unrest across the country through the 'Mujahedeen.' It recruited a large number of mujahedeen including Afghan warlords to form rebel groups. It shrewdly exploited the religious sentiments among the Muslims in its "containment of Communism" policy. It promoted jihadi culture with all-out material support without considering its far-reaching consequences. Eventually, the Soviets were forced to withdraw from Afghanistan. The Soviet Union's disintegration in 1990 marked complete victory for the US in its battle against Communism.

However, it is also a fact that Afghans have always been resisting foreign invaders, as seen in the days of the British Empire and, later, during the Soviet invasion. The international community particularly the US could not understand the Afghan psyche. Consequently, relations between the US and the Taliban could not sustain long. In 1992 the attack on Gold Mohur Hotel in Yemen, where the US troops had been staying, and later in 1998 the bombings of US

embassies in Kenya and Tanzania brought a dramatic change in the policy towards Taliban who were once in the good books of the United States. Upon American insistence, the United Nations imposed economic sanctions on the Taliban regime. These sanctions blocked, among other things, foreign investment in the country. Thus, the US-Taliban honeymoon came to an end. Clearly, the reason behind the US outrage was Taliban's defiant posture. They were no longer American stooges; they had ambitious plans detrimental to US interests.

The 9/11 tragedy added to the souring of already strained relations. The catastrophic event, coupled with the threat of further expansion, prompted the US along with the international community to launch a global war against terrorism. On 19 September 2001, president George W. Bush spoke to the nation and the world declaring:

Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with Terrorists. From this day forward, any nation that continues to support or harbour terrorism will be regarded by the U.S. a hostile regime.⁽¹⁾

This was indeed an impact of the 9/11 tragedy that turned the US more hawkish. It completely revisited its foreign policy particularly towards the 'tyrant' and 'rogue' regimes like that of the Taliban. Before the military action in Afghanistan the US delivered an ultimatum to the Taliban leadership demanding:

Deliver to the U.S. authorities all the leaders of al-Qaeda who hide in your land, release all foreign nationals including American citizens, you have unjustly imprisoned. Protect foreign journalists, diplomats and aid workers in your country. Close immediately and permanently every terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, and hand over every terrorist, and every person in support structure, to appropriate authorities. Give the U.S. full access to terrorist camps, so we can make sure they are no longer operating.⁽²⁾

The Taliban did not take these warnings seriously. On their defiance, the US with the support of NATO forces and other allied states invaded Afghanistan with the avowed objective to uproot terrorism. Washington declared the Taliban regime 'rogue' and held that they had been sponsoring international terrorist organizations especially al-Qaeda and its leader Osama bin Laden. Together with the international

community it accused Taliban of imposing extreme interpretation of Shariah in amalgamation of Pushtun tribal code all over Afghanistan and committing massive human rights violations directed against religious, sectarian and even cultural minorities and especially against women. The whole matter led to the forcible removal of the Taliban regime. Thus, another era of war and political instability in Afghanistan and the region began.⁽³⁾

On 7 October 2001, the US along with NATO forces and other coalition partners started military operation, codenamed “Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF),” with bombing the Taliban targets and al-Qaeda camps. The ‘light footprint strategy’ containing heavy air offensive but minimum ground troops was adopted at the initial stage.⁽⁴⁾ The US government justified these attacks as a response to the 9/11 attacks and failure of the Taliban to meet any of its demands. Eventually, the OEF led to the ouster of the Taliban regime in December 2001.

Towards stabilization and promoting democracy

Soon after the fall of Kabul, various ethnic groups re-emerged jockeying for power. The most prominent was the Northern Alliance representing Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras. It was already a US favourite as it had fought alongside the American forces during OEF. The other prominent ethnic entity was the Pushtun group. After some post-war consolidation the US used the UN forum in its attempt to establish peace and democracy in Afghanistan. The Bonn Agreement was the first step in this direction.

Bonn Agreement and the interim government

To discuss the future of Afghanistan regarding governance and political set-up, a meeting was called at Bonn, Germany, on 26 November 2001. Four groups of Afghan representatives — the Northern Alliance, the Rome Group, Peshawar Group, and Cyprus Group — attended the one-day meeting which was later extended to nine days. The Northern Alliance and some representatives of King Zahir Shah remained dominant during the entire discussion. The four groups concluded an agreement on an interim set-up headed by Hamid Karzai. The cabinet comprised over 30 members, with the Northern Alliance getting 17 portfolios, the Rome Group 9, and the Peshawar Group 3 while the Cyprus Group could not get any seat. Important portfolios including Interior (Younus Qanuni, Tajik), Defence (Dr. Mohammad Fahim, Tajik) and Foreign Affairs (Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, half Tajik and half Pushtun) went to the Northern Alliance. King Zahir was able to secure eight ministries including the finance, education and

reconstruction posts. Hamid Karzai, the chairman of the interim administration, took charge on 22 December 2001 for a period of six months. The Bonn summit also set a time frame for drafting a constitution. In this regard a Constitutional Loya Jirga (gathering of tribal elders and leading politicians) was scheduled to be convened by June 2002 after establishment of the transitional authority in order to legitimize the new constitution. ⁽⁵⁾

The Bonn Agreement invested interim set-up with powers of sovereign state administrator of Afghanistan, declaring that “all Jehadi factions, Afghan armed forces and other local armed groups in the country shall come under the command and control of Interim Authority. Moreover, their status would be recognized according to the needs and requirements of Afghan security forces.” ⁽⁶⁾

Central to the agreement was the provision to initiate a state-building process by setting incremental targets to establish a legitimate and sovereign democratic state. The Bonn Agreement provided a roadmap for the future political set-up. It served as a mechanism for achieving some specific political purposes, especially drafting of pacts among different Afghan ethnic groups. The agreement established a timetable for putting in place democratic institutions in Afghanistan. It also mandated the establishment of a central bank, a supreme court and an independent human rights commission.

If we look at the interim government composition — a coalition between the Northern Alliance, especially its Tajik component, and the Pushtun royalist — it seems to have generally disappointed a number of influential militia commanders or warlords in the country, several of whom acted as de-facto provincial governors. To varying extent they felt that their interests, organizations or ethnic groups were not sufficiently represented in the government and ultimately these dissident groups challenged the legitimacy of the Karzai government. Thus, the interim set-up since its inception was weak and did not enjoy the loyalties of the entire Afghan political and ethnic fragmentations. Despite the quadripartite deal at Bonn, a particular challenge was to win over groups of Pushtun ex-mujahedeen, who were not well represented in the government, and Taliban sympathizers.

The institutional milestones as laid out in Bonn had been completed by the end of 2005, but the Afghan state was still a weak and fragile one whose political presence was little to none in many parts of the country and which remained unable to provide basic security to a majority of its citizens. The specific political goals of the Bonn Agreement had been attained, though not the agreement’s underlying spirit of peace and democratic governance. ⁽⁷⁾

It is a state responsibility to provide basic security and fundamental social and economic services to its citizens through well-built institutions. However, in the case of Afghanistan, years of large-scale devastation has left no room for institutional progress in the country. The International community on its part realized that the objective of democratization could not be achieved until the strength of the central government and quality of its major institutions is built up. Even after the formation of the new set-up under the Bonn agreement, Afghanistan is unlikely to succeed in the longer term. Therefore, major stakeholders in democratic process decided with mutual adaptation to establish viable institutions in the country and tackle the law and order situation.

Permanent Constitution: A legal framework for democratic institutionalization

After drafting a national pact in the form of the Bonn Agreement and the settlement of an interim government, the next step was to devise a legal framework acceptable to all Afghan factions with regard to the nature of the government and its institutions. A 35-member constitutional commission drafted the permanent Constitution after extensive debates held in the constitutional Loya Jirga from 13 December 2003 to 4 January 2004. These debates took place among 502 delegates selected in the UN-run caucuses. ⁽⁸⁾ The delegates seemed more enthusiastic about establishing a successful national government rather than curtailing its powers. Some of them favoured a parliamentary form of government. While a few insisted on federal system, the majority endorsed the unitary state. Finally, a centralized system was adopted with a strong presidency, a parliament and an independent judiciary.

The Constitution stipulates that:

- The government would consist of ministers who work under the chairmanship of the president.
- The president shall appoint ministers and introduce them for approval to the National Assembly. ⁽⁹⁾

The US-backed Constitution provided the foundation for a new political order in Afghanistan and proved to be a crucial feature of post-invasion democratization. It intends to “establish an order based on the people’s will and democracy.”⁽¹⁰⁾ It guarantees equal rights between men and women, obligates to universal human rights instruments, and establishes the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). It also establishes the Supreme Court as an independent and highest judicial organ, with control over all aspects of the judicial profession and court administration. It is composed of nine members appointed by the

President with the approval of Wolesi Jirga (National Assembly). The Constitution entrusts the President with the right to appoint one of its members as Head of the Supreme Court. Judges are appointed on the recommendations of the Supreme Court and approval of the President. ⁽¹¹⁾ Additionally, a formal justice system consisting of the Attorney General's office, a network of prosecutors and ministry of justice have also been established.

Although the creation of these formal institutions formed the basis for a modern system of the rule of law, yet the court system is notoriously weak. Only some 20 per cent of civil and criminal disputes come into the formal justice system. Court processes are tainted by 'inefficiency' and 'corruption' which indeed is a reason for continuing reliance on customary practices and even for the popularity of Taliban-style courts in some areas of Afghanistan. ⁽¹²⁾ The permanent Constitution is considered a formidable achievement. However, lack of clarity about its sources and on the relative powers of the executive, legislature, and judiciary contributed to confusion and delay over issues such as ministerial appointments and vital preparations for elections. These challenges to the constitution and legal structure of Afghanistan are grave since they could derail the entire democratic process in the country.

Elections 2004-2005: Avenues for political participation?

First, the presidential elections were sought to be held by June 2004 but the deteriorating security situation delayed the process until October. However, parliamentary, provincial and district level elections were to be held in April-May 2005. The presidential elections took place with 23 candidates contesting. Many of them were heads of influential mujahedeen factions having support from networks of commanders with regional and/or ethnic basis, or, in a few cases, religious such as *pirs* (spiritual leaders). Masuda Jalal was the only woman candidate.

Hamid Karzai emerged as the single-most powerful candidate running for presidency since 15 candidates pulled out and boycotted the elections alleging rigging while two others withdrew in his favour. Karzai was able to secure 54.4 per cent of the vote in the first round on an estimated turnout of 55 per cent of 10.3 million registered voters. His nearest rival, Younus Qanooni, a Tajik leader, received 16.3 per cent. Similarly, a Hazara jehadi leader, Mohaqeq, received 16.3 per cent and the Uzbek warlord Dostum 10 per cent. The turnout demonstrated dominance of the structures built up through years of conflict. ⁽¹³⁾

Abdul Satar Serat, a contender blamed the election authorities of favouring US-backed Karzai. Such allegations proved true when

American vice-president Dick Cheney and his wife attended Hamid Karzai's inauguration ceremony on 2 December 2004. Further, on 23 May 2005, president Bush overtly endorsed Hamid Karzai in a joint press conference, saying: "I am honoured to stand by the first democratically elected leader in the five-thousand-year history of Afghanistan... I've got faith in this man as a leader. He has shown tremendous courage in the face of difficult odds. He's been a strong leader; he's a good friend to our country..."⁽¹⁴⁾ Following Karzai victory, a new phase of US strategy began which furthered direct links with his regime.⁽¹⁵⁾

In post-conflict countries, it is indeed important that all groups and factions participate in political process and are represented in governmental institutions right from inception. This can be done through effective political parties which are necessary to channel participation constructively.⁽¹⁶⁾ Unfortunately, this is not the case with Afghanistan. In the first election after promulgation of the new Constitution, although political process achieved broad-based electoral participation overnight with more than 70 per cent of eligible voters voting, yet an effective party structure has not developed.⁽¹⁷⁾

The reason behind this was in fact the legal order and practical realities under which the elections were conducted. It not only limited the scope for democratic competition to get institutionalized but also the ability of parties to articulate.⁽¹⁸⁾ For instance, the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system impeded formation of effective political parties. It encouraged individual electability at the cost of party influence. It was more advantageous to ethnic and military strongmen, warlords, drug traffickers, and human rights violators in the 2005 elections. This system restrained effective and independent working of legislative bodies.⁽¹⁹⁾

The idea behind the SNTV was to limit political groupings that drew support from networks of commanders, or relied on ethnic and tribal appeals.⁽²⁰⁾ However, the outcome was just the opposite as the grouping known as the Tanzim parties were the only established political organizations that could take advantage of the vacuum due to the absence of new or multi-ethnic alternatives. They remain highly personalized, factionalized, and only partially committed to democratic forms of participation.⁽²¹⁾ About two-thirds of those elected had fairly clear affiliations with some form of party, mostly ethnic or jihadi. Other political groupings, such as the Taliban and portions of Hezb-e-Islami, were systematically excluded from the political process.⁽²²⁾ To sum up, elections represented an achievement though, the political system in Afghanistan remains underdeveloped.

Democratic state-building since 2005

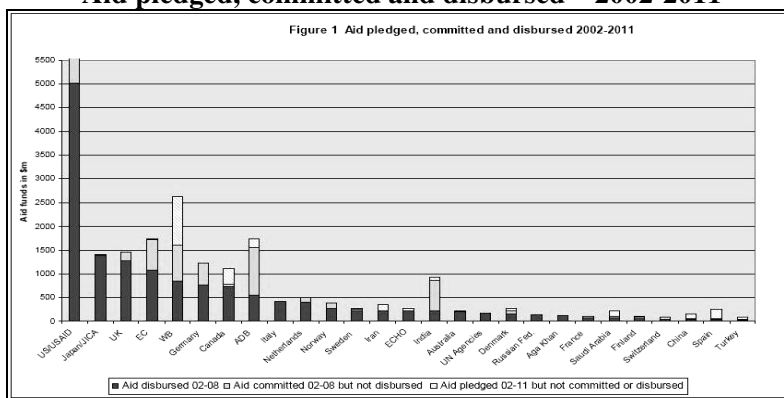
The US extended its full support to the democratically elected president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai. On 23 May 2005 both countries signed a memorandum of understanding in which President Bush pledged continued help to strengthen Afghanistan's security forces, democracy, and the economy. Addressing a joint press conference he said:

I am glad that you [President Karzai] signed with me today a memorandum of understanding on the long-term partnership between Afghanistan and the United States of America, which will make sure that Afghanistan continues to receive reconstruction assistance, which will make sure that Afghanistan continues to receive training from the U.S. for its military and the police, and which will enable Afghanistan to stand on its own feet eventually and be a good, active member of the region, contributing to peace and stability in the region, and be a bridge between various parts of that part of the world for trade and values.⁽²³⁾

Despite enhanced cooperation and assistance to Afghanistan, the situation got worse in early 2006. The reason behind Karzai's inability to establish the writ of the government was clearly the fact that he did not have entire local support. This vacuum gave rise to Taliban. They built up their operational capability and began threatening the very existence of the government. Whatever the progress made so far towards building a democratic Afghanistan was under threat of being derailed by rejuvenated role of the Taliban. In addition, both the inadequate donor funding (see figure below) and the 'culture of impunity' led to devastation of institutions. There was a dire need to improve government institutions through a concerted effort of the donor community, particularly the US which being preoccupied with the war in Iraq had to divert its focus from the rising insurgency in Afghanistan.

Figure

Aid pledged, committed and disbursed – 2002-2011



Aid disbursed 02-08
 Aid committed 02-08 but not disbursed
 Aid pledged 02-11 but not committed or disbursed

Source: Humera Iqbal, “Afghanistan: Aid and Accountability Mechanism”, *Regional Studies*, summer 2009, p.66

The US and the international community realized that the Karzai government could not achieve the goal of uniting the nation under a single political entity and subduing the armed factions. Moreover, the Bonn Agreement had failed to achieve major goals set out to be attained by 2005. Thus, owing to the deteriorating situation the international community decided to step up its effort.

On 31 January 2006 the International Conference on Afghanistan was held in London. Sixty-six states and 15 organizations participated in the meeting, which continued into the second day. It was chaired by British prime minister Tony Blair, Afghan President Hamid Karzai and UN secretary-general Kofi Annan. Both the Afghan government and the international community “Resolved to overcome the legacy of conflict in Afghanistan by setting conditions for sustainable economic growth and development; strengthening state institutions and civil society; removing remaining terrorist threats; meeting the challenge of narcotics; rebuilding capacity and infrastructure; reducing poverty; and meeting basic human needs.”⁽²⁴⁾ The delegates adopted the “Afghan Compact,” a political agreement between the Afghan government and the international community. This compact devised a five-point strategy in the light of *Afghanistan: Millennium Development Goals — Country Report 2005: Vision 2020*. It identified three critical areas in which global assistance was promised: Security; Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights and Economic and Social Development.

The US, on its part, shifted its policy from focussing on the centre to strengthening local governance through establishment of an Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG) in 2007. The basic purpose was to address growing alienation between the centre and local by expanding the decision making power of later and help them speak for their rights. In 2008, a government's Social Outreach Programme was launched to further the IDLG objective. Under this programme small payments of \$200 per head per month were given to the tribal leaders and other participants intended to persuade them to inform on Taliban insurgent movements. Primarily, it is the 'Afghan Public Protection Force' in order to build local tribally-recruited militias to help in local policing.⁽²⁵⁾

Obama's stabilization strategy and democracy support in Afghanistan

Barack Hussein Obama won the 2008 presidential elections and committed to change the existing wrong policies of the previous administration. He rode to electoral victory mainly because of his opposition to the 'bad war' in Iraq. He argued that America needs to focus on the right war in Afghanistan. The challenge facing Obama is to manage the conflict in such a way that it continues to redress the critical security situation on the ground, whilst forging a sustainable long-term engagement strategy rather than escalating the conflict beyond a reasonable extent.⁽²⁶⁾

President Obama unveiled his administration's Afghan strategy in his speech to the US Military Academy at West Point on 9 December 2009. He very consciously took middle-road, and declared sending more troops there but placed the surge within a framework by linking it with the situation in Afghanistan. It is a significant to note that Obama has focused on the counterinsurgency efforts more than democracy promotion. He focused more on maintaining stability, separating extremists into two categories and transferring responsibility to the Afghan government and security forces. In this regard, US Secretary of the State Hillary Clinton said that

We must... support Afghan government's efforts to alienate the extremists of al-Qaeda and the Taliban from those who joined their ranks not out of conviction, but out of desperation. They should be offered an honourable form of reconciliation and reintegration into a peaceful society, if they are willing to abandon violence, break with al-Qaeda, and support the constitution.⁽²⁷⁾

The enhanced involvement of the US and its Western allies in Afghanistan is predicated on an apprehension that Afghanistan is a failing state and if the international community could not 'win' the war, the Taliban would return to power, al-Qaeda would once again have safe heavens to operate against Europe and the US.

To pursue the objective of stability in Afghanistan, on 27 March 2009, President Obama called on regional powers, Russia, China and India and Iran, to join hands with the US on a single-point agenda of countering terrorism and fundamentalism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In his new 'Afpak' strategy he characterised Afghanistan and Pakistan as one theatre of military operation. He treated Pakistan and Afghanistan as two countries but one challenge. However, regarding Pakistan, he called for more significant increase in US support, both economic and military, linked to performance against terrorism. Moreover, Obama, who already has authorized 17000 troops in February, announced an extra 4,000 troops to train the Afghan National Security Forces so they could increasingly be enabled to take responsibility for the security of the Afghan people. He argued that the surge would help in the process of routing neutralising the Taliban by luring them into joining the political process; employing moderate Taliban as foot soldiers in an effort to get them to shun extremism. Another aspect of his strategy is to include Iran in the contact group. He probably intends to draw Iran to the US orbit by invoking its important role in the Afghan crisis.

2009-2010 presidential, provincial and parliamentary elections

President Karzai's term was to end on 22 May 2009. Constitutionally, the date for elections is set 60 days before the serving president's term expires. The Independent Election Commission (IEC) could not hold the elections in time due to security risks and financial reasons. The IEC re-set 20 August 2009 as the election date and justified the delay by citing another article of the Constitution.⁽²⁸⁾ This decision was opposed vehemently, particularly by United Front. Later, the Afghan Supreme Court and the Obama administration both endorsed the IEC decision. The presidential election held on 20 August turned out to be a bigger charade. The polls were spoiled by the flawed process and legitimacy crisis in spite of special attention given to every part of the process.⁽²⁹⁾ The Karzai loyalists set up hundreds of fictitious polling sites where no one voted but where hundreds of thousands of ballots were recorded towards the Karzai's re-election.⁽³⁰⁾ Abdullah Abdullah, the main opponent of Karzai, refused to accept the results. Under pressure, re-election was announced by the IEC and the date set on 7 November.

However, a week before, Abdullah withdrew from contest and left Karzai getting elected unopposed for the next five years.⁽³¹⁾

Similarly, the IEC set a constitutionally mandated election deadline of 22 May 2010 as the date for provincial and parliamentary elections. But the Afghan institutions remained unable to hold free and fair elections within the timeframe. Owing to the logistical, funding, security and other difficulties, on 24 January 2010, the IEC formally announced postponement until September 2010.⁽³²⁾ Fraud in the earlier presidential election substantially contributed to parliamentary opposition to many of Karzai's nominees for his new cabinet. In each of two rounds of nominations, more than half of Karzai's choices were voted down by the National Assembly. Thus was created an atmosphere of mistrust among the different ethnic factions and, consequently, mistrust towards the democratic process increased.

The outcome of the elections was very disturbing as the results were challenged by different opposition factions. Another important point was that many warlords and Pushtun leaders having sympathies with the Taliban won a considerable number of seats. Allegations of fraud and rigging were made against the Karzai faction and together with the elections results, ultimately the legitimacy of his government was challenged. Dissident groups and the Taliban stepped up their insurgent activities destroying peace and stability needed for functioning of democracy in the country.

Consequently, Washington-Kabul relations, souring already, further strained. The election fraud created a crisis like the one that followed the presidential polls, resulting in delays and weak governing bodies. On the war front, troop casualties are rising and lack of confidence is apparent among the allied governments even after aggressive operations against militants. Thus, the flawed election process coupled together with the high casualties led to high-level re-evaluation of US strategy. In this changed strategy, more pressure was put on Pakistan. The Obama administration during the Pak-US strategic dialogues held in 2010 clearly conveyed its expectations from Pakistan to do more in the Afghan war and particular stress was put on taking action against the Haqqani network.⁽³³⁾

President Barack Obama is more concerned about improving Afghan governance, which according to him is a long-term means of stabilizing Afghanistan and preventing its reversion to a base for terrorist groups. He categorically stated that there would be "no blank cheque" for the Afghan government if it failed to reduce corruption and deliver basic services to the people. This emphasis was expressed extensively in the State Department January 2010 document entitled "Afghanistan and

Pakistan Regional Stabilization Strategy.”⁽³⁴⁾ The corruption issue was also raised at the London Conference, held on 28 January 2010, and also discussed during Karzai’s visit to Washington on 10-14 May 2010.

Washington’s policy reviews in 2009 formally narrowed US goals to preventing al-Qaeda from re-establishing a base in Afghanistan. President Obama during his speech on 1 December 2009, outlined the US goals as: (1) to deny al-Qaeda a safe haven in Afghanistan; and (2) to reverse Taliban’s momentum and deny it ability to overthrow the government. The focus of the mission was set to be applied on 121 districts (out of the total 364 districts in Afghanistan) deemed most restive and where support for the Afghan government is lowest. The US emphasis on transition to Afghan security leadership beginning in July 2011 had been interpreted by some administration officials and some Afghan and regional leaders as laying the groundwork for winding down American involvement in the coming years.⁽³⁵⁾

Integration of insurgents and reconciliation with the Taliban

Later, the Obama administration recognized the fact that they could not win the war only through military means and that stability could not be achieved without integration of insurgents and armed groups including the Taliban into the political process of Afghanistan. Hence, the administration devised a strategy to engage the Taliban in negotiating peace in the country. In this regard, the ISAF in November 2009 set up a “force reintegration cell,” headed by Britain’s Maj. Gen. Richard Barrons, to develop additional programmes and policies to accelerate the effort to cause insurgents to change sides.⁽³⁶⁾ This issue of negotiating with the insurgent leaders and fighters had also been a major focus during the entire discussion at the January 2010 London Conference. The conference, in general, backed devoting more emphasis to reintegration of fighters amenable to surrendering. To pursue this goal, Britain, Japan, and several other countries announced a total of about \$150 million in donations to a new fund to support the reintegration process.⁽³⁷⁾ Some of the incentives to be offered to surrendering fighters, using these funds, are jobs, amnesty, and protection, and possibly making them part of the security architecture for their communities. Secretary Gates, in a January 2010 trip to the region, said the Taliban was “part of the political fabric of Afghanistan” — an indication that the US has shifted toward this approach as part of its overall strategy.⁽³⁸⁾

Even before the London conference, the Obama administration had been expanding US efforts to attract lower-level insurgents off the battlefield with job opportunities and infrastructure construction incentives. Another component of the programme has been meetings

with tribal elders urging them to persuade the Taliban and other insurgents in their areas to give up fighting. Some American commanders are reporting some successes with this effort, using Commanders Emergency Response Programme (CERP) funds.⁽³⁹⁾

On the other hand, some human rights and women's rights groups are fearful of Taliban reintegration. They argue that the Taliban reintegration will jeopardize women's rights, since they might demand curbs on women's rights as part of a deal for their reintegration. Most insurgent fighters are highly conservative Islamists who agreed with the limitations on women's rights that characterized the Taliban rule. Many leaders of ethnic minorities are also sceptical of the effort because they fear that it might further Pushtun solidarity and political strength within Afghanistan.

Obama's troop withdrawal plan

Under growing opposition of the Afghanistan war from the US public, Obama has decided to withdraw combat troops from Afghanistan. In a nationally televised address from the White House, President Obama announced that all the 33,000 additional US forces he ordered to Afghanistan in December 2009 would be home in 15 months. He said that 10,000 of the "surge forces" would withdraw by the end of 2011, and the other 23,000 would leave Afghanistan by September 2012.⁽⁴⁰⁾ The troop withdrawal decision would have a negative impact on the counter-insurgency measures in Afghanistan. However, it has been made just to pacify the negative public sentiment over the "troop surge" policy of the administration without considering the security situation.

Obama's troop withdrawal plan faced strong criticism even in the US political circles. Senator John McCain took a swipe at Obama from the Senate floor, questioning the timing of his troop pullout plan and said, "Just when they are one year away from turning over a battered and broken enemy in both southern and eastern Afghanistan to our Afghan partners — the president has now decided to deny them the forces that our commanders believe they need to accomplish their objective."⁽⁴¹⁾

This decision seems a withdrawal of Obama administration's policy to let the Afghan security forces manage the national security situation themselves. However, as they are still immature to deal with the deteriorating security the insurgents might regain control, thus leading to further deterioration, and resultantly that would undermine chances of democracy to flourish in Afghanistan.

Current status of democracy in Afghanistan: Challenges and prospects

Almost a decade of efforts to promote democracy in Afghanistan has passed but the Afghan society is still waiting to taste the fruits of democracy. The situation in the country is still very dangerous in terms of security and governance. Since 2001, a number of measures to establish a stable and prosperous Afghanistan that could provide better services to its population, were taken but a real, viable and functioning democracy could not be established. To gauge the current state of democracy many non-profit organizations have conducted research and the results present a gloomy picture of the state of democracy in Afghanistan.

Freedom House, a think tank, in its yearly assessment scored Afghanistan 14 in 2001, the worst score possible on its index. By 2005, Afghanistan's Freedom House score rose to 10, and settled the country in the "Partly Free" category. This score is the same score as that of the troubled states of Yemen and the Central African Republic. The score indicates democracy in Afghanistan, while making limited progress until 2005 (see table 1), has since stagnated at the lowest measurable level of partial freedom by global criteria.

Table 1

Changes in Freedom House scores of Afghanistan: 2001-2007	
Years	Points
2001	14
2002	12
2004	11
2005	10
2006	10
2007	10

Source: www.freedomhouse.org

Though the most recent Freedom House numbers on Afghanistan have improved since 2001, its narrative report offered a gloomier assessment of the situation, suggesting a downward trend in effectiveness of government. According to its 2008 country report, "little progress was made on various governance issues, including attempts by the central government to combat corruption, improve transparency, and strengthen judicial and law enforcement services. In the prevailing atmosphere of impunity, numerous human rights abuses, including attacks on aid workers, political and social activists, journalists, and schools, as well as

systematic violations of women's rights, were reported during the year."⁽⁴²⁾

Currently democratic indicators of Afghanistan are at the lowest ebb. Continuously deteriorating security situation, corruption, weak institutions, lack of political will and insecurity are potential threats to democracy in the country. Establishment of illegitimate government with weak international commitment to curb challenges has worsened the situation instead of providing a conducive environment for democracy to flourish.

Challenges to democracy promotion

Almost a decade of efforts has passed seeking to democratize the country, but democracy-building in Afghanistan is still a policy goal to be pursued by the US and the international community. There are encouraging indicators that suggest that democracy can take roots but at present challenges loom large that have the potential to derail the whole democratic process. The US along with the international community used various practices and strategies to stabilize and democratize Afghanistan but all efforts proved futile.

According to the data collected by Jason Campbell and Jeremy Shapiro, "the security environment in Afghanistan is continuously deteriorating. Civilian fatalities have doubled since 2006, after having increased by a considerable fraction from 2002-2003, as have U.S. fatality rates. Fatalities among Afghan security forces are now well over 1,000 a year. Total foreign force losses since 2001 now exceed 1,000 in aggregate (with British and Canadian forces now having each lost more than 100 troops, and the U.S. over 600). Afghan security forces have grown very slowly and remain badly undersized. Police and border security forces have followed a similar trajectory."⁽⁴³⁾

Only 30 per cent of the army and just 3 per cent of the existing police force rank in the top two tiers of combat readiness. Kidnappings remain rampant, and roads are increasingly unsafe for foreigners as well as Afghans themselves, with the Taliban increasingly able to disrupt normal commerce and movement, especially at night. And, the acreage of Afghanistan's farmland devoted to opium production has roughly doubled in the last few years.⁽⁴⁴⁾ The overall security environment is still not conducive for the functioning of democracy. There are many potential challenges to the democratic process in Afghanistan that can derail it and, if not tackled properly, can lead to chaos and anarchy again in the Afghan society.

The insurgents have repeatedly and methodically destroyed Afghan communities by endorsing and fanning ethnic, linguistic and

religious frictions.⁽⁴⁵⁾ Especially in the last decade of war the warring factions have tried to bring ethnic and linguistic differences to the forefront of national politics as a means of maintaining control over the population. Due to the influence of commanders and local warlords, who by coercive and covert means have positioned themselves beyond the reach of the state, local institutional structures have become enormously vulnerable.⁽⁴⁶⁾

Afghanistan's multiplicity of ethnic identities and linguistic divisions make forging national democracy a particular challenge. Pushtuns, particularly in the south, feel marginalized in spite of Karzai himself being a Pushtun. Indeed, many Pushtuns see Karzai as a figurehead president representing external rather than Afghan interests. Correcting this sense of exclusion is a vital challenge.⁽⁴⁷⁾ A high proportion of government positions have been filled by Tajiks and other non-Pushtuns. This forced many Pushtuns to view the new government through an ethnic prism, because they had traditionally dominated the government.⁽⁴⁸⁾ In its effect this means that Karzai's political support base includes many groups who either distrust or oppose the government he leads.⁽⁴⁹⁾

Legitimacy of the government has been challenged by Pushtun citizens and that discontent has posed formidable opposition to government policies and Taliban insurgency has been able to make its strongest inroads in Pushtun territory in Afghanistan's east and south. However, majority of Afghans from all backgrounds oppose the Taliban, including Pushtun opponents of the current national government. In spite of this anti-Taliban sentiment, Afghan scepticism about the ability of the national government to govern as an honest broker and improve their lives causes many, especially Pushtuns, to either sit on the sidelines or sometimes passively support the Taliban.⁽⁵⁰⁾

The functioning quality of the parliament as a representative of the Afghan population is marginal. Another fact is that a significant number of figures with ties to the Taliban are members of the parliament. International Crisis Group argues that the parliament has more warlords and criminals than democrats. Even many pro-American figures have unsavoury pasts which suggest a suspect commitment to democracy.⁽⁵¹⁾

The resurgence of Taliban and deterioration of security, with a central government that is still seen as weak not only by the Taliban fighters but also by many Afghan citizens whose expectations have not been met, point to problems in the task of rebuilding. Moreover, the de facto decentralization of political power to the Taliban and warlords in some areas of Afghanistan has resulted in empowerment of non-state actors who control illegal as well as legal trade, further undermining the

strength of the central government and the newly woven fabric of Afghan democracy.⁽⁵²⁾

The economic, security, governance and overall political situation in Afghanistan is at a point where the progress made in building a democratic country is under threat of being derailed due to the abovementioned factors as well as because of an inadequate international commitment to Afghanistan and the failure of government institutions to provide essential services needed by the people. The Obama administration's current policy focus on transferring responsibility from the US to the Karzai government and on withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan irrespective of considering its political and security situation has generated added burden on the fragile Karzai government and incapable Afghan security forces, and thus posed a further challenge to democracy-building.

In a recent Bonn Conference held on 5 December 2011, President Hamid Karzai while highlighting the challenges said that "poverty and underdevelopment are still our top challenges. Our young democracy remains fragile, and the Afghan people are yet to see their aspirations realized through strong, effective and accountable national institutions."⁽⁵³⁾ He said that his nation would require continued financial support through the next decade. He stressed that the work of the past 10 years could get undone "unless Afghanistan's significant fiscal gap is addressed."⁽⁵⁴⁾

Ali Ahmad Jalali, former interior minister of Afghanistan, argues that "the failure of the Bonn Accords to produce a viable peace plan is further exacerbated by the absence of a cohesive long-term post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation strategy in Afghanistan. The entire focus on fighting terrorism has thwarted political approaches aimed at reaching out to reconcilable elements that later managed to regroup and launch the insurgency. There has been no clarity about whom to talk to, what political cost is acceptable in order to achieve peace and what kind of an end state is envisioned."⁽⁵⁵⁾

Moreover, the regional environment is still not conducive to any political settlement in Afghanistan. The neighbouring states appear to be more interested in asserting their influence. Resultantly, the Afghan civil war could drag on. In this whole scenario, Pakistan's role is central to the counterinsurgency effort. However, the present strategy of the US is not helping enhance the positive role that Pakistan might play particularly for a political settlement.⁽⁵⁶⁾

Prospects for democracy

Over almost the last ten years, the people of Afghanistan have faced many challenges and hardships in the shape of bombings, death and destruction, and overall invasion of their land by foreigners; however, at the same time they have also got a historical opportunity in terms of measures taken to free them from oppression and violence and build a democratic society. Their interests have coincided with the collective security interests of the international community. They have also been witness to many political landmarks that have become possible as a result of this convergence of interests.

Since the end of 2001, Afghanistan has made progress towards democracy in terms of reconstruction of its political, social, and security institutions. These include adopting an enlightened Constitution, holding presidential and parliamentary elections, raising a national army and national police force, dismantling major factional militia units, starting building a national economy, expanding and improving formal education system, and improving the status and future of Afghan women. These indicators provide a hope for better future for a democratic Afghanistan.

Regarding prospects for democracy in his country, the foreign minister of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, Dr. Rangeen Dadfar Spanta, speaking in early 2008, in a seminar in Finland very optimistically declared:

“Six years ago, Afghanistan was a geography without a state; a country destroyed by invasions, wars, foreign interference, terrorism and oppression; one third of our population were either refugees outside our borders or displaced internally; our people were denied even the most basic human rights including education and health. Six years on, the picture is very different. Today, our people are taking part in a genuine political process to shape their own destiny as a nation. A new constitution has been adopted, new democratic institutions created, and a new, democratic government has been elected. Despite all the odds, the freedoms enjoyed by our media and civil society organizations are totally unprecedented and unparalleled across the whole region. In addition, millions of children are going to school today who would not have the opportunity to do so six years ago; over five million of our refugees have returned home; we have implemented more development projects during the past six years than the previous three decades put together.”⁽⁵⁷⁾

In sum, the prospects for Afghan democracy are poor because challenges to democracy loom large. The coming 5-10 years would be very crucial in view of these challenges. The environment for promotion of democracy is not much conducive; there is an alarming resurgence in Taliban insurgency as they have launched a campaign to recapture territory they had lost to allied forces and Northern Alliance. The American-backed government of Hamid Karzai has proven to be both extremely weak and corrupt. President Obama had sent additional troops to Afghanistan to counter the resurgent insurgency but recently he has declared the schedule for the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan. In this situation, the prospects for promoting democracy in Afghanistan appear very poor. ⁽⁵⁸⁾

Existence of permanent hostility between different ethnic communities has resulted in violence and chaos in the Afghan society undermining the state institutions capacity to function properly. Lack of viable institutions and sluggish economic development has further worsened the situation in the country. However, an environment conducive to the establishment of democracy could only be created with long-term and enhanced commitment of the United States, the Afghan leadership and the international community.

Conclusion

Building democracy in Afghanistan is at a critical juncture today. Legitimacy of democratic measures has been challenged. The United States and the international community considered elections as a major milestone in establishment of democracy in the country and focused more on elections than strengthening institutions and tackling insurgencies. But fraud and rigging in the last presidential and parliamentary elections by the US-sponsored Hamid Karzai faction has increased scepticism among the Afghan people about legitimacy of democratic measures taken by the US and the international community.

The Obama administration took significant steps to strengthen institutions in Afghanistan and to reduce violence and disorder there. Currently, it is pursuing a policy of integrating the insurgents and dissident groups, especially reconciliation with the Taliban to engage them in the political process, but this strategy requires time and enhanced focus to work in the long run.

Despite efforts on the part of the Obama administration and international players in Afghanistan the situation there is still not conducive to smooth functioning of democracy. The state-building efforts today are at a precipice. The Bonn Agreement viewed the Loya Jirgas and parliamentary elections as means to legitimizing the nascent

Afghan government but in practice the goals set in the agreement could not be realised. The Obama administration efforts to stabilize the country by integrating and reconciling with the Taliban and other insurgents seem distant from reality.

The most important point is that without capable and accountable institutions, legitimacy of the Afghan government and the international community in establishing democratic institutions will fade away and that would also undermine democratic state-building efforts in Afghanistan. The challenges faced with regard to democratization of the country require enhanced and well-coordinated measures by the US, Afghan leaders and the international community to strengthen institutions. Only a coordinated approach can curb the menace of insecurity and terrorism and will ultimately reverse the increasing insecurity, growing narco-economy, continued low level of socioeconomic well-being and deteriorating state legitimacy and can establish stability and order that can facilitate establishment of democracy in Afghanistan. Last but not least, China's potential role in Afghanistan needs to be considered seriously. Seeking to integrate its abilities in the region is fundamentally important now. There are new and converging interests between China and the United States, making possible a strategic partnership that could lead to peace and sustainability in the region.

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