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Anatol Lieven

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Opinion

Afghanistan: An unsuitable candidate for state building

Anatol Lieven

If the West loses in Afghanistan and its region, perhaps the most important reason—leaving aside Pashtun courage, grit and fanaticism in the misguided service of the Taliban—will be that we are pursuing five different goals simultaneously, most of which are in contradiction to the others. However, this shambolic ‘strategy’ is not fortuitous. Each goal has been set by powerful Western forces, and indeed real Western needs. The problem is that the West in general, and the US in particular, lacks institutions and leaders capable of choosing between these goals, and coordinating a strategy in pursuit of the most desirable and achievable ones. These goals are:

- victory in the war against the Taliban, a force which now embodies a large part of Pashtun ethno-religious sentiment;
- the creation of Afghanistan as a more-or-less modern, effective and democratic state;
- success in destroying or at least containing wider terrorist and extremist forces in the region and the Muslim world as part of the ‘Global War On Terror’;
- a radical reduction in Afghanistan’s role as the principal source of heroin making its way to the West; and
- the preservation of NATO as a meaningful international military organisation, and through this, the preservation of a close Transatlantic relationship in general.

Professor Anatol Lieven is Chair of international relations and terrorism studies in the War Studies Department, King’s College London and a senior fellow of the New America Foundation in Washington DC. Members of his mother’s family served over several generations in the British Empire of India. His latest book, co-authored with John Hulsman, is *Ethical Realism: A Vision for America’s Role in the World* (Pantheon, 2006).

Not merely are these goals to a considerable extent incompatible, but in several cases we have not even really thought through what 'victory' in this context would actually mean, and whether any meaningful success is actually achievable.

In principle, and in Western rhetoric, the war against the Taliban is the cardinal element in Western strategy; it is the hinge on which the other elements depend and this hinge in turn is fixed into the larger structure of the 'war on terror'. Thus the US, backed by its Western allies, overthrew the Taliban because they gave a base to Al Qaeda, who carried out 9/11. The US and its allies continue to fight in Afghanistan because if the Taliban were to return to power in all or a large part of Afghanistan, they would once again give a safe haven to Al Qaeda. In order to win in this fight—and one day to withdraw from Afghanistan—that country has to be turned into a successful modern state. The drugs trade has to be suppressed because it helps fund the Taliban. Moreover, NATO is fighting in Afghanistan because of the national interests of its members in combating the terrorist threat, but also to show its relevance as an organisation to the most important security issue now affecting the West. None of these propositions is necessarily false in itself. The questions are whether they are complete explanations, whether they hang together, and if not, whether they can be made to hang together.

The two greatest tensions are between the war in Afghanistan and the wider 'war on terror', and between the war against the Taliban and the 'war on drugs'. Thus while it is certain that the Taliban's Afghanistan provided the chief base for Al Qaeda before 9/11, this does not necessarily prove that Afghanistan will be central to the 'war on terror' in future. In the first place, as numerous experts have pointed out, it is a grave mistake to see the world of Sunni Islamist terrorism and extremism as an organisation with a hierarchy and a centre, or even a number of centres. It is rather an ever-growing web with numerous nodes in numerous countries, of which Osama bin Laden, Aiman al-Zawahiri and their immediate lieutenants form only one.

Second and much more importantly, there may be a direct clash between the short-term priority of beating the Taliban and the wider long-term goal of combating Islamist extremism and terrorism. This dilemma is summed up in one word: Pakistan. On the one hand, when it comes to the fight against the Taliban, it cannot reasonably be denied that the possession of safe havens and supply bases in the Pashtun tribal areas of Pakistan are a very important asset for our enemies. The possession or lack of such safe bases on the other side of international frontiers has played a vital role in the great majority of guerrilla wars over the past three generations; in wars in Indochina, Algeria, various African and Central

American conflicts and even Northern Ireland. Putting pressure on Pakistan to crack down on Taliban support in the tribal areas would seem therefore to represent elementary military logic.

Alternatively, however, when it comes to the wider 'war on terror' Pakistan, not Afghanistan, is the crucial country in this region. The reasons for this should be obvious. Afghanistan has always been a backwater of the Muslim world. Pakistan is central to that world's future. It has six times Afghanistan's population, a powerful army, and nuclear weapons. Pakistan's relations with India are critical to the peace and development of South Asia. The large Pakistani diaspora in Britain means that Islamist extremism in Pakistan reaches into the heart of the West. As recent years have shown, this represents the single greatest terrorist threat to Europe and perhaps to the US as well. The collapse of Pakistan would be a disaster of immense proportions.

A great deal of the Taliban's support comes from the Pashtun areas of Pakistan, whose people are closely linked to their co-ethnics in Afghanistan, and among whom hostility to the US is overwhelming. The Taliban are using these areas as safe havens from which to launch attacks into Afghanistan. This is understandably causing great anger and frustration in both the Afghan government and the West.

The danger is that if Taliban attacks intensify, and the prospect of Western victory recedes still further, the US may react either with open military raids into Pakistan, or by putting massive and successful pressure on the Pakistani government to launch an overwhelming military offensive against the Taliban and their local supporters in the Pashtun areas.

The first strategy would utterly humiliate the Pakistani government, and spread anti-Western fury and Islamist extremism across Pakistan. The second would almost certainly lead to civil war in Pakistan, and the present war in Afghanistan becoming a regional one. This might temporarily reduce the Taliban's pressure on NATO in Afghanistan, but at the cost of radically destabilising Pakistan. In other words, we would have gained a limited and temporary tactical victory at the cost of a grave strategic defeat.

The second most obvious tension is between the war against the Taliban and the war on drugs. It is entirely true that the Taliban derives much of its income from the heroin trade. Unfortunately, this is also true of the Karzai administration. Many of its members, at both national and provincial level, are major figures in the trade; in fact, in one important province of my acquaintance, every single leading figure on the anti-Taliban side has been credibly linked to the trade.

Heroin is also critical to the administration—and hence to the West as well—in that it is critical to the Afghan economy in general, on which rests public contentment and state revenues. According to NATO figures, opium poppy cultivation and processing makes up at least two fifths of Afghanistan's real GDP. In fact, its role in Afghanistan's commercial economy is much greater even than this figure would suggest, since so much of the rest of the economy is either subsistence farming or directly dependent on international aid.

When I visited poppy farmers in the—then—very pro-Karzai province of Nangrahar after the fall of the Taliban, I asked them what their response would be if the West launched a major programme of crop eradication. One headman replied, to general agreement: 'First we will kill every Westerner in the province'—a pause—'Except you of course because you are our guest; and then we will join the Taliban.' I asked them about financial compensation. Every one replied in some approximation of these words: 'Don't make fun of us. You say you know Afghanistan. Therefore, you know what will happen. Of any money the West gives for compensation, the officials in Kabul will steal three quarters and the officials here will steal the rest. You can't seriously believe that we will see any of it.' Unfortunately, I found their words on both points entirely credible.

The US administration, and the new US ambassador to Kabul, now seem determined on a major push for crop eradication, with what are likely to be truly disastrous results for the struggle against the Taliban. They have categorically rejected proposals from the Senlis Council and other organisations that the West should replicate its strategy towards Turkey and elsewhere from the 1970s on, and buy the crop to turn it into morphine-based anaesthetics for distribution to Africa and other impoverished regions, where the demand is huge but health services are too poor to buy them.

This is of course a problematical proposal in several ways, especially when it comes to stimulating more and more production in Afghanistan, and undermining world prices in ways that will harm Turkish, Indian and Thai farmers who have received production licenses under previous deals. However, after consideration of this issue I simply cannot see any other approach that stands even a limited chance of reducing the heroin trade without radically alienating many Afghan farmers and driving them into the arms of the Taliban. Certainly, it would be grotesque to balk at the cost involved in buying the crop, when even the highest estimates of this are a small fraction of what we are spending on the war in Afghanistan. Moreover, as my Nangrahar informants pointed out, for the foreseeable future it will be hopeless to rely on the Afghan state to distribute compensation, or to hope that we can create sufficient cadres of our own to do so effectively.

This leads in turn to the whole question of building up an Afghan state as part of the struggle against the Taliban. This is a worthy and indeed noble project, which appears to be going nowhere. The Afghan state under President Hamid Karzai, on the whole, remains an empty shell occupied by forces which claim to be acting in the name of the state but are in fact pursuing their own ends. There is nothing surprising or even unusual about this. It is true of many African countries for example. In Afghanistan, three immensely powerful factors are at play: the ancient cultural traditions, which have always inclined many Afghans, and Pashtuns in particular, to resist state power; the shattering effects of a generation of savage warfare; and the fact that this warfare is continuing and intensifying today. To judge by historical precedents, the chances of an outside occupying force building up an indigenous state in the middle of a civil war look poor. This is especially true because Western development bureaucracies (as opposed to those concerned with humanitarian aid) are not designed to operate in the complete absence of functioning state institutions, and appear largely paralysed.

The problem about the continuing emphasis on building up the Karzai state, creating Afghan 'ownership' of Afghan development processes (an ownership that does indeed exist on the part of many Afghan officials, but not quite in the sense we would wish) and so on is that it often seems to be getting in the way of Western efforts to bring development directly to local communities. Some of the provincial reconstruction teams are doing excellent work in this regard, but they are far too few to make a really substantial and visible difference in a country larger than France or Spain.

Perhaps even more seriously, the emphasis on trying to create a highly centralised, modern state—or at least the outward forms of one—may impede efforts to win over Taliban elements and create regional peace agreements. These will inevitably have to involve a very considerable formal devolution of power to local councils and leaders; and there is a certain history in Afghanistan of such deals sticking at the local and regional level, however imperfectly. By contrast, I find it almost impossible to imagine former Taliban figures sitting in a government in Kabul and sharing real power and exercising real authority alongside representatives of the Northern Alliance. The killings would be likely to begin after the very first cabinet meeting.

My recommendations for Western strategy in Afghanistan, therefore, are the following:

- The US and EU should co-ordinate an international strategy to purchase Afghanistan's opium poppy crop for conversion into pharmaceutical stocks for international aid,

or when necessary simply for destruction. As set out in this essay, this strategy has real risks. The strategy presently being pursued by the US however involves not risks, but certain disaster.

- Hopes for the rapid creation of an effective modern state in Afghanistan should be radically scaled back. Instead, the West should recognise and subsidise the authority of local councils and religious figures, and seek to draw local pro-Taliban leaders into these institutions.
- International aid should be focused above all on projects designed to generate large numbers of reasonably paid jobs for manual labourers, especially in the construction of transport infrastructure and urban housing. All residential, educational and medical projects should have a new mosque, and where appropriate, a madrasah at their heart.
- Considerations of Afghanistan's vital interests should be placed at the heart of the West's relations with Iran. The offer of Western recognition and international legitimisation of a strong, institutionalised Iranian role in Afghanistan should be part of negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme. However, we also need to recognise that such a role would in fact be very much in our and Afghanistan's interests—and is in any case to a degree already a reality. Above all, Afghan economic development requires close links with Iran, and access to Iran's large reserves of (Dari-speaking) professional skill.
- Remember that in the long term, and especially from a British and European perspective, Pakistan, and not Afghanistan is the important country in this region. We should do everything reasonably possible in the years to come to defeat the Taliban. However, we should also recognise that threats from a failed Afghan state in civil war could be contained, as they could have been prior to 9/11, given wiser Western policies. Given Pakistan's size, nuclear weapons and diaspora, the problems generated by Pakistani collapse would be of a wholly different order of magnitude. Therefore, while the West does need to press Pakistan to do more to combat Islamist extremism, on no account should we put such pressure on Pakistan that it would seriously undermine Pakistan's own internal stability.
- This being so, if over the next 10 years the situation in Afghanistan fails to improve, and the military and financial support of European NATO members for the operation evaporates, the US and its remaining allies should not adopt desperate and perilous strategies to save the existing Western project there. Instead, we should adopt as a fallback position the *de facto*, informal partition of Afghanistan between Iranian, Pakistani and Uzbek spheres of influence, with a UN force to protect the city of Kabul

as a neutral zone. The Taliban would doubtless achieve dominant power in the Pashtun areas, but military assistance to their rivals would prevent them from conquering non-Pashtun areas, and would put pressure on them to create armistices with their enemies. The key regional actors would have to undertake—under threat of severe sanctions—to do their utmost to prevent the establishment of terrorist bases in their spheres.

The policy proposals set out in this essay do not just look highly unsatisfactory—they *are* highly unsatisfactory, especially when set against the high hopes which followed the overthrow of the Taliban. It is, however, the task of ministers, officials and analysts in the West to face facts squarely, and not comfort themselves with fantasies—especially since the lives of large numbers of their fellow citizens in uniform depend on the policies they adopt. The question, therefore, is not whether these proposals are ideal, but whether any other policies can possibly work better, or indeed work at all.

In this context, we also need to face another fact. Over the past 170 odd years, both the British and Soviet empires tried to rule Afghanistan and shape it to their own ends. Like the Americans in Vietnam, the Soviets never lost a battle, but they were worn down by a decade of guerrilla war with no possible end in sight.

The British in the 19th and early 20th centuries lost several battles, sometimes disastrously; and though they won all the wars, they leaned not to rule Afghanistan directly. Instead, they adopted a strategy of managing Afghanistan and the tribes of the Afghan frontier. This was a very unsatisfactory strategy, and required constant bribery, astute diplomacy, a brave and expert cadre of officials and soldiers with long expertise—and literally dozens of punitive expeditions, involving thousands of casualties among British and Indian troops. However, the British had learned the lesson that unsatisfactory though this was, it was better than the disastrous alternatives. Do we really think that we are better people than British frontier administrators like Colonels Warburton, Sandeman and Jacob, and can do better in managing this region? What on earth in our recent history would suggest that? I still believe that it is possible for us to wear down this latest Pashtun upsurge, as the British wore down previous such upsurges in the past. For this, however, we will need not only the fortitude and local knowledge of our distinguished ancestors, but their patience and flexibility.