

Military and Aid Responses: the Afghan Dilemma Response to Astri Suhrke and Juan Garrigues

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'When More is Less' by Astri Suhrke

In her extensive report, 'When More is Less: Aiding Statebuilding in Afghanistan', Astri Suhrke writes a scholarly and provocative treatise which presents a compelling critique of the Western illusion - even infatuation - with international aid to Afghanistan after September 2001. She rejects the argument that there has not been enough (that the promised aid has not been forthcoming or that it has been stingy by comparison with other conflict areas like the Balkans). The failure to develop a viable economy at the local level, the alternatives available in the poppy economy and the political fragmentation of the country, have acted in tandem to undermine the political authority of the central government.¹

In addition, Suhrke contends that the criticism that aid has been skewed too much towards a military solution misses the point. Suhrke's central argument is that both economic and military assistance, in the form that it is given and managed by foreigners, and in light of the inadequacies of the recipient Afghan government's bureaucratic apparatus, is at best a stopgap measure that over the long term is more than simply futile. The rentier state created by foreign aid is antithetical to achieving the overarching aim of an accountable and legitimate central government. This in turn is a necessary precondition to building a strong and self-sustaining state, and 'the exact opposite of (...) the goal of a state-building process'.

Indeed, there is an inherent and self-perpetuating problem of foreign aid raising and then disappointing expectations - classic conditions for producing protest and revolt. The external budget that is the province of the international donor community has produced conditions of weakness, dependency and 'quasi-sovereignty'. The perceived political weakness of the government, its identification with anti-Islamic forces and its inability to deliver either security or economic benefits for the reconstruction of the state, to stem corruption, and to provide good governance and judicial procedures at the local level, have all combined to make it either unattractive or downright dangerous to ally with the Hamid Karzai government.

Suhrke is equally adamant about the counterproductive nature of foreign military aid and the reliance on Western troops to provide security and defeat the insurgency. She levels a criticism, which has become increasingly common, of the heavy-handed operations which indiscriminately kill civilians, and challenges the model of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) - civilian-military units with dual responsibilities for security and development. Suhrke argues convincingly that the PRTs have emphasised security, working with the military, and defeating the enemy to the detriment of reconstruction. Since the Taliban and other insurgents and their sympathisers are often insinuated into the local population, this has meant that

¹ Ninety percent of the heroin comes to Europe now from Afghanistan. For a thorough treatment of the question of the failure to stem poppy cultivation and drug trafficking and its impact on instability and the insurgency see 'Losing Ground: Drug Control and War in Afghanistan', *Transnational Debate Papers*, No. 15, Transnational Institute, December 2006.

economic development work has been quite circumscribed. Thus foreign aid, both military and economic, as presently construed in Afghanistan, contains the seeds of its own contradiction. More aid in sheer quantity - both economic and military - while maintaining the present local and international structures and actors, will not resolve the problem of Afghanistan's failing and fragmented state. In fact it is having the opposite effect and encouraging the increasingly violent insurgency in that country.

Perhaps Suhrke may be exaggerating to make an important point and to encourage a fresh look at the perceived wisdom regarding the benefits of foreign aid. If economic aid may have become self-defeating, it is also true that the government would have collapsed without foreign aid. Regarding the military component, Suhrke and Garrigues need to offer a more complex and nuanced discussion of its application.. In what way could military aid and military force - especially at the outset - have been applied differently and calibrated and coordinated with economic aid to assure the internal security necessary for the achievement of development goals? It is becoming increasingly evident that the US-led military campaign to root out terrorism and pacify Afghanistan has as of 2007 resulted in more terrorism - including heretofore absent suicide bombings - and more war. As in other international situations, the Bush administration has displayed an almost obsessive reliance on strictly military solutions. The US Department of Defence has led Western military aid and has expended eleven times more in its military efforts than in an economic reconstruction programme. Moreover, the Pentagon's heavy-handed concentration on simply seeking out and killing Al Qaeda assets and Taliban insurgents, while appearing indifferent to serious civilian casualties in both ground and aerial bombing campaigns, and its collusion with local warlords, has seriously damaged the overarching objective of winning the allegiance of the Afghan people. It remains to be seen whether it may have contributed to reversing for the foreseeable future the statebuilding process.

'Why Sometimes More is More' by Juan Garrigues

Juan Garrigues in 'Why Sometimes More is More: Military assistance to Afghanistan' offers a response to Astrid Suhrke. He grants Suhrke's cogent point regarding the self-defeating quality of economic aid, which needs to be adjusted to the competence of local Afghan structures in order to be absorbed and utilised efficiently. Less, but more intelligently administered economic aid may now be the practical approach.²

However, he disagrees sharply that this is also true with military aid, which Suhrke states 'was misconceived from the beginning due to an overambitious assistance and military agenda'. Suhrke argues that the very nature of the foreign military intervention delegitimised the government and therefore more military presence - even at the outset - meant less legitimacy.

Garrigues maintains that the initial light footprint of the US and NATO forces and the decision of the UN-mandated and NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to limit the presence of international troops to Kabul have had disastrous effects. He believes timing was crucial and more at the beginning would have meant more - and perhaps, ultimately, definitive - legitimacy for the new government in

² Fariba Nawa, an Afghan, writes: 'It's hard to prove how much of the money donated in the past five years was wasted, mismanaged, misused and, in some cases, stolen. But the former Afghan interior minister Ali Jalali said in a recent press interview that he estimated only 30% of that money was actually spent on aid projects in the country. See 'How the West short-changed Afghanistan', *Sunday Times*, London, 29 October 2006.

Kabul when it still had relative credibility with the people. In addition, Garrigues argues that a more robust and better coordinated military presence in the hands of the NATO-led ISAF (rather than the US military) at the start would have in fact provided the necessary security to overcome the flaws in the economic assistance plan and to win over the population. That missed opportunity now appears fatal. The error of withholding the potential military force consequently led to the rise of the insurgency, the deterioration of security and the crippling of the internationally-led economic reconstruction programme.

While Suhrke discounts the conventional criticism that foreign efforts have been inadequately staffed and funded, Garrigues holds with that criticism - especially in the critical initial period. Indeed, compared to many recent post-conflict situations - Afghanistan has never been considered in the same sense as Bosnia, and Kosovo - it has had relatively fewer peacekeepers and resources. As late as of 2005, Washington was preparing to reduce the 20,000 US troops by 3,000.

Moreover, the dreadful blunder of the Bush administration's decision to invade and occupy Iraq has had serious negative consequences for Western policy in Afghanistan. Washington's obsession with the false danger of Iraq drained military resources, economic reconstruction aid and political energy away from Afghanistan and the Pakistan border area. The diversion of attention to the dismal disaster in Iraq shifted the focus of the war on terrorism from the true geographical centre of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Together with Washington's kid-gloves treatment of the Pakistani government of Pervez Musharraf and Pakistan's military and Inter-service Intelligence (ISI) tolerance of Taliban fighters in its borderlands area, inhibited efforts to neutralise both the Taliban and Al Qaeda in that critical zone. The hemorrhaging of US prestige throughout the Muslim world further complicated the question of the legitimacy of the allied Karzai government.

Garrigues' emphasis on more military aid and force application by the ISAF, however, avoids the more critical question of exactly how that extra force would have been employed. While Suhrke recognises the inadequacy of an oversimplified military response, her stress on less military force also limited a full discussion of the complex security strategies required. If Western coalition forces had been more prominent after September 2001, but, as is probable, had followed the Pentagon's approach of eliminating the armed opposition rather than developing a variegated programme for providing local security, it is very likely the scenario Suhrke paints would simply have appeared sooner.

Suhrke correctly underscores the fact that the US has been and continues to be 'clearly (...) the most important foreign actor'. Even though the Pentagon pushed for the development of an Afghan national army and by mid-2006 transferred more of its military functions to NATO, the role of the US remains dominant and Washington continued to 'set the ground rules for international military involvement by virtue of its own combat forces on the ground (in Operation Enduring Freedom) and as the preeminent member of NATO'.

We see now, for example, when NATO is playing a larger role, that they are basically following the US play book, bombing targets in a way that produces civilian casualties and embitters and alienates Afghans. The military is trained to kill the enemy and they were --and are-- doing what militaries do - sometimes in an unfortunately excessive and clumsy manner. What might have made a difference is

not more military aid so much as a security approach predicated on a serious effort at developing local (especially rural) police, intelligence-gathering and judicial capacity, and rooting out corruption. There is also no indication that there will be a change in military strategy any time soon. At the NATO summit in Riga in November 2006, Washington asked its NATO allies to help pull its Afghan chestnuts out of the fire by committing more troops while offering no evidence that the Pentagon recognised its past errors of omission and commission.

The ISAF was and is still subject to the overall US strategy and it is unlikely it would have ever strayed much from the Pentagon's game-plan. NATO took control of the ISAF in 2003, but the US still dominated, providing the bulk of the troops and the shared command structure. NATO forces, while criticised for being less aggressive than US forces, were essentially subordinated to overall US military strategy which defined long-term security as killing enough Taliban and other anti-government insurgents to eliminate the physical threat they posed to the new Afghan government. Currently, the ISAF, consisting of 32,000 troops and support personnel from 34 nations, claims to have eliminated 4,000 Taliban or foreign jihadists in battle during the past year. Yet, 2006 saw the highest number of insurgent attacks since 2001. There are now approximately 600 attacks a month, still far from the nearly 1,000 a week in Iraq, but four times the rate in Afghanistan last year. The Taliban are resurgent inside Afghanistan and in Pakistan along the 500-mile border of tribal areas.

Brute military force against terrorism has proven to be as futile as classic counterinsurgency doctrine warns it is for confronting local insurgencies. In general, the more you beef up military forces - even at the beginning - the more you risk losing the allegiance of the population you are trying to win over by using excessive force. As with counterinsurgency, the first objective in an anti-terrorism campaign is to gain control of the population and then win their support. It is thus clear that any serious effort to reach the critical but elusive 'turning point' in Afghanistan should have begun not with the development of a national army, but with providing local security - a precondition for the attainment of all other objectives. The issue, however, is how this security is achieved. Simply applying military pressure as Garrigues suggests - a heavy footprint, but one planted with more precision and caution - without attending to other long-term security measures risks producing just the sort of alienation of the population and consequent delegitimation of the central government against which Suhrke warns.

Increasingly now, US commanders are recognising the pitfalls of simply throwing more troops at complex insurgencies. Echoing General John P. Abizaid, the senior commander in the Middle East, who opposed augmenting US troop strength in Iraq without a commensurate emphasis on a political solution, General James L. Jones, at the time NATO's supreme commander, recently said there was no purely military solution in Afghanistan. Jones emphasised the need for 'strengthening local police forces, creating a viable justice system and statebuilding: fostering political and economic development on a national scale'.

Even conceding the counterfactual that 'more [military force] would have meant more [benefit]' at the critical start of the intervention, it is arguably late in the game to apply that formula now, as Garrigues admits. Foreign military actions in Afghanistan by the coalition-led Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and the abuses and the climate of impunity in which they have occurred, contributed to

delegitimising the central government - and have brought it close to the critical 'turning point' of no return. Any change now may be, as Garrigues says, a case of 'too little, too late'. Thus, the arguments for more or less application of force in 2001-2002 are really academic. The question is whether the debate extends to the present. There is a growing fear that either course may now be inadequate to defeating the insurgency and stabilising Afghanistan. Policy recommendations, explicit in Suhrke's thesis and implicit in Garrigues' critique, may be increasingly irrelevant.³

Many Afghans held scant sympathy for the Taliban at the time of the invasion. A government seen as seriously addressing the security environment and providing a measure of social justice and protection from the abuse of authorities would have gone a long way to ensuring long-term public support. Much more important in the kind of conflict we see in Afghanistan is developing the cooperation and commitment of the local populace in a joint venture of nation-building. A people feeling empowered and invested in the success of this enterprise are less likely to become recruits of, sympathisers with - or just seekers of protection from - insurgent forces. Instead, the US-led military effort short-changed these objectives and what have proven to be effective deterrents to insurgency - that is, intelligence-gathering and sharing across borders, undramatic but meticulous police work and security procedures to limit terrorism's possibilities. What the West should have worked for is 'sustainable' (that is, viable and long range) security. This was a goal that, when the US considered it at all, was sought only through military deployments.

So what do we do now? It is doubtful that a change such as described above would at this juncture allow Afghanistan to reach its 'turning point'. It is even more doubtful that such a change is in the offing.

By launching a fierce campaign against the Taliban and labelling all resistance to perceived foreign occupation as Taliban-related, the ISAF and the US have conflated these groups in the minds of Afghans and thereby strengthened their common identification. Moreover, NATO's aerial bombing has produced an inordinately high death toll among civilians, provoking an outcry even from the Karzai government, which undoubtedly worries about the potential for stoking anti-Western sympathies and multiplying the enemies of a regime allied with the West. As a 'senior Western military official' told *the Washington Post* on 16 September 2006, 'We have killed a lot of Taliban, but they are not running out of foot soldiers, and for every one we kill, we create new families that hate us'. Finally, it should be remembered that the mere survival of the insurgency is in itself a triumph that boosts its prestige in the country. It is a commonplace among counterinsurgency specialists that 'the guerrilla wins if he does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win'.

Afghanistan is currently experiencing its worst wave of violence since the Taliban regime was toppled five years ago. Militants are using tactics like suicide and roadside bombings that have so thoroughly shredded security in Iraq. The year 2006

³ See, for example, the accounts of the worrisome state of affairs and the various degrees of pessimism in Afghanistan in the recent reports, Barnett Rubin, 'Saving Afghanistan', *Foreign Affairs*, January-February 2007; 'Afghanistan's war: A double spring offensive', *The Economist*, 22 February 2007; 'Breaking Point. Measuring Progress in Afghanistan', Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, 23 February 2007.

saw nearly 140 such suicide attacks, including in Kabul. The much heralded elections last year have not produced anything like the stability they promised; poppy cultivation has mushroomed in the vacuum of security that the still weak national Afghan forces can do little to fill. Heroin production is mushrooming. In January 2007 Taliban Commander Mullah Muhammad Omar announced that he would never negotiate with the US-backed government of Hamid Karzai and pledged to continue the war until foreign troops withdraw from Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan continues to deteriorate. Symptomatic of the spread of violence was the roadside bombing that killed a Spanish soldier on 21 February 2007 in the relatively quiet zone of Herat. NATO, which sees itself as the world's most powerful military alliance, faces the real possibility of political and possibly even military defeat in its bloody war of attrition with the Taliban. It now casts a wary eye to what has been announced as an almost certain spring offensive by the Taliban-dominated insurgency.

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Afghanistan has become a test case for NATO. If the alliance fails there, 'NATO will be finished', said former US National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft.⁴ While people from President George Bush to Senator John McCain, and coalition partners doing most of the fighting in the south like Great Britain and Canada, are calling in frustration for more assistance from NATO countries like Germany and Italy, NATO countries remain divided on commitment and strategy. At the same time, Great Britain is withdrawing 1,600 troops from Iraq (down to 5,500), it is sending 1,000 more troops to Afghanistan to increase its commitment to 6,000 (NATO has a total 35,000 troops there), and is committed to their staying until at least 2010. Germany has been responsible for police reform and training, and Italy for improvement of the largely corrupt judicial system at the local level. But they are being pressured to do more and to produce better results as well as to contribute to the fighting in the south. Yet NATO defence ministers ended a meeting in Seville on 9 February 2007 without making major commitments to fill gaps in its military capabilities in Afghanistan.

The differing strategies reveal fundamentally divergent views about the purpose of NATO. The US sees the Atlantic alliance as part of a global struggle against terrorist threats and collapsing states. The White House calls it the 'global horizon'. But US NATO allies are increasingly criticising US military tactics, pointing out that the bombing raids and violent house searches are mobilising the civilian population against NATO troops. 'The Americans are at war and the Europeans want to solve conflicts', said a German NATO official in Brussels. When Chancellor Angela Merkel mentioned to George Bush that military involvement was important but at the end of the day the West needed to fight for the Afghans' hearts and minds, Bush listened respectfully and then changed the subject.⁵

The European Union has contributed to civilian projects which became dominated by the military mechanism of the PRTs. Now through the relatively new crisis management mechanism within the framework of the European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP), the European Council and the European Commission of the EU have announced that they will engage in necessary work on police and judicial

⁴ 'Afghanistan Overshadows NATO Meeting. Allies Deeply Divided on Eve of Summit', Spiegel Online, 27 November 2006.

⁵ Ibid.

reform designed to strengthen state authority in the provinces. They will coordinate this with the work done by the Germans and Italians.⁶ Again, it remains to be seen if this is also going to be too little, too late.

In the final analysis Suhrke is persuasive in her contention that simply more aid, without a strategy for recognising and acting upon the complex realities on the ground in Afghanistan, was never the answer. Gaining the support of the people was more critical than the amount of aid itself. Garrigues makes sense to parse the military problem in time periods and to indicate that more dedication of military resources at the beginning might have produced a more positive result. But both fail to address adequately the central problem of how military aid - whether in the amounts actually expended in the initial period or ideally in greater amounts - could have been coordinated with economic aid to produce a sustainable security environment at the local level.

Understanding and acting upon the fundamental needs of the local population for security and well-being rather than pursuing the Pentagon's need to score military victories might have made the most effective use of foreign economic and military aid and secured the West's objectives of shoring up a failed state. Over the long-haul, only by addressing head-on grave social and economic problems in the interior of Afghanistan can we expect to dry up the swamp of violence and terror that threatens the security of the people in conflicted areas. Those who sympathise and join violent groups often are motivated by a basic desire to achieve a measure of social and economic justice in their lives. Acting in concert with local populations to ensure their dignity and well-being represents a more solid foundation than the current Western aid policies for building and sustaining peace.

Time may be running out for the US and NATO to win the crucial battle for the hearts and minds of Afghans. The West must succeed in convincing the people of Afghanistan that Western forces seek the common political goal of a democratic and inclusive state. It may yet be possible to disarm the offspring of decades of internecine violence and war against foreign intervention - but only by finally harnessing wisdom to power.

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⁶ Initiative on Peacebuilding and Governance in Afghanistan, Toledo International Centre for Peace, Madrid and Seville, February 2007.