

Afghanistan and the Pakistan crisis

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NATO and the US are calling for a boost in troops for the war in Afghanistan, but it is necessary to assess whether the only options available are to provide more troops or withdraw. In view of this demand, many experts consider that military strategy should be reassessed. Development policies should be used more effectively, and the Afghan government needs assistance in managing the funds it receives. Negotiations with the insurgents are vital and the Afghan war should be situated in a regional context, particularly in relation to Pakistan. The assassination of Benazir Bhutto highlights this need.

Canada, Germany and Holland are immersed in debate over sending more troops or withdrawing. The US and NATO are urging Spain, Germany and other countries to be more flexible about regulations in order to commit more troops to combat areas. Spain deploys about 700 soldiers in the less dangerous northern part of the country.

According to the United Nations, a fifth of the territory is highly unsafe for operations. NATO and the US do not control large areas of the country, and the Afghan government even less so, as its effective control does not extend beyond Kabul. The Taliban and other armed groups are not in complete control of the war-torn territories, but they prevent the international forces from securing their positions.

The insurgents use suicide attacks and bombs on the roads. NATO and the US carry out frequent air attacks, which cause civilian deaths and therefore resentment. This in turn feeds a multiple insurgency that includes a mixture of radical Islam, drug trafficking, tribal identities and local patrimonialism. The British journalist Simon Jenkins, summing up in *The Guardian*, considers that for the allies "there is no realistic mission, no achievable objective, no long-term strategy, only the fruitless pursuit of failure".

The US and its allies expect the Afghan army and the corrupt police to fulfil their missions, but professional personnel are lacking and a judicial system is not in place. Hamid Karzai's government and its representatives are accused of corruption and of not protecting women in public office, who are increasingly under threat.

Afghanistan exports 93% of the world's opium supply. Growing poppies provides work and guarantees the power of the warlords. Despite the eradication and substitution programme, cultivation increased by 59% in 2006, amounting to a third of the country's gross national product. Armed groups invest the profits in weapons and provide jobs, something that the state does not do. The US wants to fumigate the poppy fields, as it did in Colombia, but this will only increase the unpopularity of the international forces.

The debate over Afghanistan focuses on three aspects. The mission's objective, resources needed (especially human resources), and negotiations with the insurgents. When the US invaded Afghanistan in 2001, it overthrew the Taliban, a Muslim group of Pashtun origin which is the ethnic majority in Afghanistan and part of Pakistan. However, Washington and its allies put more effort into the war against Al-Qaeda and arming groups linked to drug trafficking such as the Northern Alliance. Other aspects were neglected such as encouraging development projects, controlling the border with Pakistan and promoting inclusive policies in a society with deep ethnic and tribal divisions.

Not enough attention was given to including the population outside Kabul, and developing plans to combat poverty, provide jobs for rural areas and protect women's rights. International donors have been controlling the security budget, the mandates of the foreign troop operations and the tax system, thus weakening the government and Parliament, as pointed out by Astri Suhrke, an expert at the Michelsen Institute (Bergen).

The Taliban fled to Pakistan, where they regained their strength with the support of the Pakistan army intelligence service. Pakistan military personnel openly support the Taliban because of their sense of ideological affinity. They are also interested in counteracting India's influence in Afghanistan. The US has failed to exert any pressure on Islamabad - such as cutting off military aid - to make this support cease. In the wake of Bhutto's death, destabilisation will increase in the Afghan-Pakistan border region. Barnett Rubin, from the Center on International Cooperation considers that "the main centre of terrorism 'of global reach' is in Pakistan".

In NATO circles the need for a unified ISAF-US command is debated, in addition to massive deployment of troops. The US Government is planning to send 3,000 extra marines as a way to put pressure on its European allies. But before talking about numbers, a different use of development aid should be analysed, to strengthen the government and lead the way to negotiations. The British General Richard Dannatt declared in September that most people who fight with the Taliban do so "for financial, social and tribal reasons" and that "we must beware of tarring them all with the same brush, as I am sure that one day we will need to deal with and eventually reconcile the elected government with the majority of this people". Europe too needs to re-examine its short-sighted local and regional strategy. In the wake of Benazir Bhutto's assassination, and given President Musharraf's increasing weakness, there will be no solution for Afghanistan that is not linked to Pakistan's future.

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