

Success in Afghanistan

By M. Ashraf Haidari

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Roger Cohen, in his column "Afghanistan at the tipping point" (Globalist, Nov. 1), clarifies a major point: "Afghanistan is not Iraq."

It's true: No peace operation is winnable without popular support. We have the Afghan public behind us, but we can lose that if we do not deliver peace.

According to recent polls, the Afghan people cite insecurity, weak governance, a poor economy and unemployment as the largest problems facing the country.

How should we overcome these and other obstacles? First, by ending regional interference as the main source of instability in Afghanistan; second, with long-term programs to rebuild Afghan state institutions and economy; and, finally, by ensuring international unity behind our efforts.

Achieving overnight victory isn't feasible. But neglecting Afghanistan again risks mutual assured destruction as 9/11 once demonstrated six years ago. Thus, success is the only option.

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Afghanistan at the tipping point

By Roger Cohen

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KABUL: Afghanistan is not Iraq. That's the good news. Decades of war are devastating, but they are not as crippling as decades of Saddam Hussein's totalitarian hell. The glint of initiative outweighs fear's residue in Afghan eyes. Therein lies hope.

Across this dirt-poor country - think sub-Saharan Africa - small signs of initiative and awakening abound: new carpet-weaving businesses, surging wheat production, just-opened schools, solar panels on mud-brick village homes. Annual growth of over 8 percent is significant.

Since the Taliban's fall in 2001, more than 4 million Afghan refugees have come home in one of the biggest post-1945 returns of people. About 38 percent of school students are girls, up from zero. Roads, clinics, mine-clearing and several million cellphones are changing Afghan lives.

Such transformation may seem a decent return on about \$22 billion of American investment since 2002. A further \$5.6 billion of U.S. taxpayers' money will likely be spent in 2008. The strategic aim is a stable Afghanistan no longer up for rent from one-eyed mullahs as terror's launch pad.

But if Afghanistan is not Iraq, it's not delivered from war either. Lebanon looks stable by comparison. Like Poland, Afghanistan has long suffered the fate of a weak state squeezed between powerful neighbors. Unlike Poland, it grows poppy and inhabits a region of explosive volatility.

That's the bad news.

I heard many assessments of how long Afghanistan will depend on Western military assistance, but Abdul Jabar Sabet, the attorney general, was bluntest: "The Afghan army will not be able to defend the country for 10 years, so the international force has to be here for at least a decade."

He's realistic. An intense U.S. effort is going into producing a credible 72,000-man Afghan army by 2009. The number may be met, but the force's ability to sustain itself, maneuver, and mount large operations will lag. Captain Sylvain Caron, a Canadian "mentoring" a nascent battalion, said "the cultural change will take 20 years."

The police are way behind the army. Police training has been a disaster. Low salaries, belatedly rising toward \$100 a month, have made corruption endemic, particularly in narco-territory. The formation of a credible police force is at square one.

"We're looking at a long-term commitment," William Wood, the U.S. ambassador, told me. How long? "A number of years." How many? "It would just be dishonest to pretend to be able to give you a number." But, he added, "The role of the U.S. military will change."

Yes, it will recede, but slowly. The next U.S. president will face an enduring challenge in Afghanistan of immense proportions. He or she will need to level with the American people, in a way President George W. Bush never has, about the real burden of an attempt to build two countries from the ground up at once. That burden can no longer be borne by military families alone, however much Iraqi extrication is achieved.

For now, unlike in Iraq, the United States has real allies in Afghanistan. Peter Struck, the former German defense minister, said Germany "will also be defended in the Hindu Kush." But that European conviction is fraying as casualties rise. The Dutch seem set to reduce their contingent next year.

The next president will have to fight to maintain NATO solidarity. Huge problems loom. Among them are containing the rampant corruption of governors chosen by President Hamid Karzai; breaking the growing overlap between drug traffickers and a resurgent Taliban; better integrating the disparate and sometimes contradictory international efforts; and limiting the degree to which Pakistan and Iran meddle to ensure a weak Afghanistan.

"The insurgents go some places I cannot go," said General Dan McNeill, the NATO commander in Afghanistan. "The NATO mandate goes only so far as the borders." Wood told me the country "is facing an insurgency that is able to reconstitute itself outside the country." That's grave.

As these comments suggest, the Taliban remains a product of Pakistan, at least in part. U.S. efforts to get the needed cooperation from its ally have proved inadequate.

All these problems are exacerbated by the unpopularity of Bush's America. Of course Iran sees in Afghanistan another chance to hurt U.S. interests. But it's not alone. Russia likes that game these days, and China is not averse.

Within the alliance, the Iraq-tinged European view of the United States as belligerent, simplistic and insensitive to Islam does not help unity of purpose.

I can't see Bush righting these problems. But the cost of defeat is unacceptable. It would destroy NATO. It would further destabilize nuclear-armed Pakistan. It would propel the ideologues of jihadism to new power.

Not least, it would take those girls out of school. Kabul lessons, and not in kite-flying, are in order for all serious White House candidates.

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