

## The Denial of Failure in Afghanistan

**Noureddine Jebnoun**

The Afghan geopolitical terrain, which historically never had the reputation of being easy to negotiate, has made life particularly difficult for the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and its allies, which have witnessed internal political quarrels being added to the tactical military failures.

The Taliban guerrilla and the Arab fighters who joined them had no chance to militarily defeat the modern Western armies deployed in Afghanistan. But in contemporary asymmetrical warfare, an unvanquished guerrilla is a victorious guerrilla. However, in the seven years of NATO's deployment, the Taliban have not ceased extending their influence over Afghan territory. Far from being confined in the South, they have multiplied their attacks, reaching Jalalabad, the largest city in eastern region of the country, and even the capital, Kabul, which lived in relative peace until a year ago.

At the root of this failure are several mistakes of analysis, mostly but not limited to American origin. The European allies are not absolved from the same mistakes. Western public opinion conflates al-Qaeda and Taliban, thinking of them as one organization. This confusion, when wanting to justify war leads to rejection of any negotiation with the Taliban.

Then there are the underestimations, even the misunderstanding, of a country whose three main features are:

- Extreme poverty, which means that the country's natural resources are still modestly utilized. Water is scarce and industrialization is almost non-existent;
- The absence of a normally functioning central government;
- The gradual disintegration of governmental administration after nearly thirty years of conflict without interruption.

Therefore the error was made right from the outset in 2001: whereas it would have been necessary to prioritize the development and the rebuilding of the country in an accelerated way, the Americans prioritized the military fight against terrorism.

Today, the situation in Afghanistan is extremely complex. However, it can be summarized thusly: the insurgents recruit fighters, particularly in the villages of the Pashtu tribes in the south of the country, because the population, after nearly seven years under the rule of the Karzai government, still does not see any economic improvement. The international community is viewed as an accomplice in this situation, since the logic

of “the Global War on Terror” led to the formation of a joined and united front in NATO which is perceived as unconditional support for a Kabul-based regime often considered to have failed and become corrupted. It should be added that the ill-considered air strike raids by American and other NATO forces, which have killed and wounded countless innocent civilian have been exploited for political gain by the Taliban thanks to remarkably adept communication.

In addition, prosperity has unfortunately empowered the Taliban’s influence: those benefiting from the profits of opium poppy cultivation pay each insurgent \$150 per month, which is the minimum average subsistence income to live in Afghanistan, whereas the Afghan national army pays only \$100 per month for each soldier.

Today, there are within the nebula of the insurgents many components, which includes the following: those discontented with the new regime who cannot survive economically; autonomous Pashtu tribes; the Taliban themselves who, if they preach a radical version of Islam, are not less essentially Pashtu, which gives the conflict an ethnic dimension; and foreigners trained in the camps of al-Qaeda who are Arab fighters coming from different countries of the Middle East. In these circumstances, it is difficult on the ground to distinguish the “bad guys” from the “good guys.”

At the Bucharest Summit (April 2008), NATO revised its strategy in Afghanistan. The “comprehensive approach” consists in considering that the solution cannot be merely a military one and that without development and better governance, one will not be able to stabilize Afghanistan. This step, widely accepted today, is undoubtedly a good one. Unfortunately, on the ground, it appears that this strategy’s reversal, which is contradictory with the way in which the Americans have carried out military operations, has appeared far too late. The widespread feeling is that the US had implemented a wrong agenda: they prioritized in 2001 the fight against terrorism, whereas they should have focused on development and good governance. Today it does not seem possible any more to reverse the course of events: the insurgents are gaining ground in Afghanistan. Everyone agrees that it will take several years before obtaining results in terms of governance and development. However, presidential and legislative elections will be held in Afghanistan in 2009, and it is unlikely that they can take place in many southern areas where the Taliban controls broad sections of the territory. In other words, President Karzai is likely to lose credibility next year, and with him the Western community which has supported him. As for NATO, it will have been unable to reverse the military situation on the ground.

So what should be done? Today, there appears to be no other alternative but to negotiate with the Taliban, which is what President Karzai has begun to undertake, seeing in these negotiations the possibility of ensuring his political survival. The British also realize that the hope of a military victory is an illusion and they have announced it in a semi-official way. For Americans, approving the prospect of negotiating with the Taliban would be a volte-face and the harsh words of the two candidates for the presidency of the United States used to describe the Taliban certainly do not facilitate this step. The involvement of Iran, but especially Pakistan, in a political settlement appears necessary. Today, the bulk of the insurgency is nurtured by Pakistan, where it enjoys a home base, and it is thus necessary to convince the Pakistanis of the need for greater involvement in this conflict

not only to deprive insurgents of their base in the Pakistani tribal areas, but also to be involved in the political solution.

Whether on purpose, or through sheer blindness, the United States has long relied on the Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf, without realizing that he dared not stop the Islamist drift of part of his army towards the Taliban. Historically, US policymakers have exhibited in constant misunderstanding of the situation in Afghanistan. During the Soviet period, America supported the arming of the most anti-Western movement of the Mujahedeen led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar at the expense of the more moderate led by Ahmad Shah Massoud.

When the Soviet Red Army withdrew in February 1989, Afghanistan ceased to be a pawn in the Cold War. This ensuing lack of interest in Afghanistan with the international community has been the breeding ground for the extremism of the Taliban. Today, the Pakistani regime is in full deliquescence, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar is the dangerous companion of al-Qaeda, and the United States discovered suddenly that the billions of dollars disbursed each year to their Pakistani “ally” was not useful, contrary to what they expected, to fight against al-Qaeda.

The objectives of the Afghan policy of Islamabad have nothing to do with those of Washington. Furthermore, the ethnic solidarity of Pakistani and Afghan Pashtu has always created the illusory reality of a border embodied by the “Durand Line” (disputed by Kabul); Islamabad sees the efforts of New Delhi to strengthen its diplomatic and commercial ties with Afghanistan as a threat of encirclement by India. The historical willingness of Pakistan to have a feudal regime in Kabul can only be exacerbated by the India’s involvement. It partly has explained the difficult relations between Presidents Karzai and Musharraf and the ambiguous policy of Pakistan with respect to the Taliban. The United States was misled into believing that their windfall disbursements would be enough to reconcile their support of President Musharraf to their Afghan policy.

The obsession of the Pakistani generals to not be supplanted, on the strategic level by the Indian army, should have convinced Washington to use its financial assistance as a lever to force Islamabad to join in its military objectives in Afghanistan.

In this situation, it might be necessary for Westerners to better prioritize their interests. A stable state with a power-sharing between the different factions, certainly difficult to find in Afghanistan, would allow the West to be disengaged militarily and focus on the real threat which is al-Qaeda.

Less spectacular than the war in Iraq, the Afghan crisis is more delicate to manage for the Western powers. In Iraq, the United States has, until now, despite repeated mistakes, benefitted from the support of the Kurds and most of the Iraqi Shiites. In Afghanistan, the main ethnic group (Pashtu) is marginalized, and the guerrilla war on the border with Pakistan might continue for years or even decades. After seven years, the benefits of the fall 2001 campaign seem low for the security of the United States. Their strategy might be counterproductive. The Pakistan’s ungoverned, un-governing and ungovernable region of North Waziristan has become a safe haven for the most radical opponents of the United

States and the presence of American soldiers on the ground has reinforced the alliance between the Taliban, the al-Qaeda leadership and the local population. Once again, Afghanistan is facing an empire, American this time, with disproportional military might giving the false assurance of victory to the hyper-power.

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