



The 800-Pound Gorilla: The Interrelationship of Culture, Economics, and Security in Afghanistan

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On October 7th, 2001 the United States military embarked on a quest to disrupt the use of Afghanistan as a terrorist base of operations.¹ Before 2001, antiterrorism efforts were generally limited to direct-action efforts against terrorist camps and interests. After 9/11, however, it was determined that the United States has both a strategic and a moral interest in a prosperous and peaceful, democratic Afghanistan.² It was thought that ad-hoc efforts to disrupt terrorist operations in one area would simply lead to terrorist activity moving into other areas, and that a lasting peace could only be attained through a comprehensive effort to eliminate the conditions that allow violent, extremist ideologies to flourish. Over the past eight years the international community has made tremendous effort to bring security and economic development to Afghanistan, but it has barely lifted a finger to help modernize the culture. It's now well understood by U.S. strategists that we'll never have lasting security in Afghanistan without economic development, but we haven't yet learned that there won't be sustainable economic development without cultural change. We must recognize that culture, economics, and security represent the three legs of a stool that is Afghanistan – ignore one and it will never stand on its own.

Establishing democracy was presumed to be the solution to the Afghanistan problem. We quickly learned, however, that the Afghans are far more concerned with security and economic necessities such as food, shelter, clean water, and jobs – concerns much lower down on Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs. This was made astoundingly clear in 2004 when the people voted overwhelmingly for a constitution that established the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan as a representative democracy, yet the breadth and strength of the Taliban has only been growing.³

The Afghanistan conflict is now fully recognized as a counterinsurgency operation. Insurgencies gain the critical support they need from the population by exploiting grievances often unrelated to their cause. In rural Afghanistan, for example, the Taliban are often the only option the people

¹ President George W. Bush, Speech to the Nation, 7 Oct. 2001.

² President George W. Bush, Speech in Kabul, Afghanistan, 15 Dec 2008: "We have a strategic interest and I believe a moral interest in a prosperous and peaceful democratic Afghanistan, and no matter how long it takes, we will help the people of Afghanistan succeed."

³ Dreazen, Yochi. "Gates Says Taliban Have Momentum in Afghanistan." Wall Street Journal. 26 May 2009.

have for security and jobs. Coalition forces are working furiously to counter these deficits by training the Afghan Army and Police, and by financing the building of roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, and a wide variety of public works projects. This insurgent-counterinsurgent tug-of-war appears to have become a stalemated contest of wills and endurance. And unfortunately, if there's one thing that insurgencies in Afghanistan are good at it is outlasting their foreign opponents.

It has become increasingly clear that a new strategy is required in Afghanistan that will deliver a decisive push and defeat the Taliban on its own turf. This new strategy, which builds upon current security operations, must attack the very conditions that allow the Taliban to exist. U.S. military and coalition forces providing direct aid or even making noble attempts toward "capacity building" will only hold the Taliban at bay. Legitimate integration into the global economy is the only hope for Afghanistan.

Some gains will be made and small achievements realized, but Afghanistan will never resemble anything close to a flourishing democracy capable of resisting extremist ideological influence unless it develops a versatile, sustainable economy that can provide to its people the basic necessities of life without relying on cultivation of drugs or external financial support. This vision of a dynamic and self-sustaining economy would absolutely require integration into the global economy from which Afghanistan would draw capital investment and technical expertise, and to which it would contribute where it possesses comparative advantage: a hard-working, rugged labor force, natural resources, and agriculture. Integration into the global economy, however, is not possible until the Afghan people remedy several aspects of their culture that currently render it an anathema to the global economic community, most notable of which is their treatment of women.

A New Way Forward

The U.S. military has long been involved in various forms of "stability operations" in foreign countries. Large hospital ships bring U.S.-quality medical care to third-world ports and continuous efforts are undertaken in Africa, Southeast Asia, and Central America to dig wells, build schools, and fund civic projects. While individual servicemembers are often motivated to participate in these missions for humanitarian reasons, it's widely understood that these projects are not sustainable after U.S. servicemembers leave the area; there is simply no way for a poor country with minimal health infrastructure to continue to provide the remarkably advanced medical and surgical care offered by U.S. personnel on, for example, the USNS COMFORT.

Afghanistan, however, requires an entirely different approach to stability operations. Modern US Counterinsurgency Doctrine is based on a strategy of "Clear, Hold, Build." The ability of U.S. forces to "clear" an area of enemy or insurgents is unparalleled, highly refined, and not in question. And our ability to "hold" an area is limited only by the raw number of personnel that we are willing to dedicate to a particular operational area. But it's the "build" portion of the strategy where Afghanistan presents a particularly difficult and most critical challenge. Without a successful "build" component, the entire counterinsurgency effort – and all of the sacrifice of blood and treasure to date – will have been in vain.

Current strategy in Afghanistan calls for helping the newly established Afghan government provide security as well as build roads, bridges, schools, hospitals, power plants and other civic projects -- all in an effort to legitimize the new government in the eyes of the population. If the Afghan government is perceived by the population as capable of providing basic security and essential services then the population will be more likely to support their government and reject the Taliban and other insurgent groups. But if cooperating with the Taliban is seen as the best way to achieve security, or if it is viewed as the only source of income for a family, the people will choose to side with -- or at least tolerate -- the Taliban. It's that simple.

What is not simple is determining how a government can provide security and build hospitals, roads, and power plants in a country where a generous estimate of GDP is \$800 per person, per year, and only half that if calculated using real market exchange rates.⁴ The vast majority of an Afghan's income is spent to secure food, and what little is left is spent on shelter and clothing. There is no tax base from which the new government can raise any significant revenue to begin providing security and other essential services.

The international community's solution to this problem, to date, has been to pay for everything. We have established four regional hospitals plus a national military hospital in Kabul, built thousands of miles of roads, spent billions of dollars on the energy sector, and billions upon billions of dollars elsewhere. Not only can the Afghan government not pay for any of these development projects, but it can't even afford to maintain them after we leave.⁵ The salaries of the 80,000-member Afghan National Army and 80,000-member Afghan National Police force, and the salaries for the government officials themselves, are all paid with U.S. and coalition dollars.

In a counterinsurgency operation, it matters very little how many insurgents are killed or captured on any particular day, month, or year. The outcome of the war will be wholly determined by the Afghan people themselves. They will decide if they believe their government to be legitimate -- that it can provide security and essential services -- or they will have to tolerate the Taliban despite all of the harsh realities that choice entails. Unfortunately, a government wholly dependent upon foreign donations for its very existence is not likely to be viewed by anyone as legitimate.

A reasonable assessor of the situation would therefore conclude that there are only three possible paths forward. The first is that the United States will continue to fund the operations of the Afghan government indefinitely. This is not an unrealistic possibility given the threat to our national security that would be posed by a Taliban takeover in Afghanistan and the pressure this would place on nuclear-armed Pakistan. The problem with this course of action is the United States is experiencing financial strains of its own, its military is spread thin, and exactly how much longer the American public will continue to tolerate casualties in a foreign conflict it does not understand is very much in question.

⁴ CIA World Factbook. As accessed from <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/AF.html> on 8 June 2009.

⁵ "Interim Strategy Note for Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for the Period FY09 to FY11." International Development Association and International Finance Corporation. World Bank Report #47939-AF. May 5, 2009. Pg 1.

The second possibility is that Americans will grow weary of a war with no end, withdraw the bulk of their forces, and resort to a hands-off containment strategy that consists mainly of surgical strikes targeted at terrorist camps or nuclear, biological, chemical, and other terrorist threats. The Afghans believe this to be the most likely outcome⁶ and, in their defense, this is what happened after we assisted them push the Soviets out of their country 20 years ago. The Afghans see our development efforts, as I do, as unsustainable – completely dependent upon foreign assistance for their continued existence. For their own safety and security – not to mention economic survival – too many Afghans are therefore choosing to keep one foot on the side of the Taliban. This is why we, and the Afghan government, are losing the war.

There is only one good option left for Afghanistan. The only hope for a successful outcome in Afghanistan lies in the possibility that Afghanistan might experience a remarkable period of rapid, unprecedented economic growth over the next decade or two that will allow its government to fund some of the most basic services that it requires to survive. Unfortunately, this is proving to be a much greater challenge in Afghanistan than was initially imagined. Afghanistan has infrastructure devastated by decades of war, an under-educated population in very poor health, an inhospitable climate, and difficult mountainous terrain. That is why the international community has been working tirelessly from day one in an attempt to remedy these deficiencies by building schools, hospitals, roads, irrigation systems, a police force and an army. Despite these efforts, however, sustainable economic growth has not occurred and prospects for it improving in the near to mid-term future appear very dim.⁷

The prospects for legitimate economic growth in Afghanistan are so bleak because there is a much larger problem that remains unaddressed in Afghanistan; it is the biggest rock yet unturned and the 800-pound gorilla in the room. Afghan culture -- a culture so inconsistent with the core values deeply cherished by the developed world -- is preventing Afghanistan from joining the global economic community and benefiting from the fruits of its own labor.

A Focus on Economic Growth

All developed countries are either blessed with an awesome abundance of natural resources -- such as a number of OPEC countries -- or they have developed business-friendly cultures that attract capital investment, international trade, and cultivate the talents of each of their citizens so that they are employed to their full potential. At present, Afghanistan has neither the natural resources of an Iraq or a Saudi Arabia, nor the favorable culture of a Germany or Japan that allowed each of those countries to prosper after the Second World War.

The way in which women are treated in Afghanistan is often discussed in terms of morality and human rights, and little to no action is ever taken by the international community because it is

⁶ Chayes, Sarah. Special Assistant to the Commander, International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) Afghanistan. Comments made during lecture at National Defense University. June 2, 2009.

⁷ While real GDP growth rates for Afghanistan from 2001-2009 have been estimated to fall between 5 and 14%, these figures are including the massive expansion of opium production (now \$3 billion/year or 25% of GDP by market exchange rates) in addition to all of the growth that is a direct result of foreign spending and donations that began after 2001.

typically seen as outside the scope of our “mission” and not in our purview to pass judgment on another country’s culture. In an era where societal change is equated with colonialism, culture is considered untouchable no matter how much it conflicts with universal values or mission success.

But the global economic community does not care about political sensitivities or ill-will leftover from the colonial era, and its only mission is to make money. It is not an international organization with a politically-correct and risk-averse board of trustees, nor is it a government steered by several dozen “working groups” that carefully shape international policy. It is the collective sum of billions of decisions made every single day by individual consumers, producers, and investors the world over. In this new age of economic globalization, currency swarms around the globe in a frenzy of activity, and capital accumulates where it is best able to return the most product or service per unit cost. If one country discovers a new way to extract oil or produce any other product at less cost than others, capital will instantly flood into that country until its output per unit of currency regresses to the mean.

Currency flows readily into Luxembourg, where GDP is over \$81,000 per-person per-year, because their business-friendly culture invites foreign investment (most of their banks are foreign-owned) and they successfully cultivate the potential of each and every one of their citizens to create an educated, versatile workforce. Afghanistan -- the polar opposite -- beats down 50% of its population by restricting their education, discouraging productive work, and smothering entrepreneurial spirit and innovation. An investor looking for a source of low-cost labor to build a factory is likely to pass right over Afghanistan and build elsewhere because Afghan culture erects such enormous barriers to productivity.

Even when Afghanistan sells off some of its natural resources, as it recently signed a \$2.9 billion contract with China for the rights to a copper mine just southeast of Kabul, it earns far less than what it otherwise could.⁸ Investors weary of working with the Afghans and their difficult culture subtract a risk premium from the price they are willing to pay for otherwise very valuable assets. Just as individuals must learn the corporate culture if they are to succeed in the corporate world and military recruits need to adapt to military culture if they are to survive in their new world, Afghanistan needs to adopt a more inviting culture if it ever hopes to be a welcome participant in the global economic community – a condition that is essential if Afghanistan is ever to prosper.

Even if one wants to argue that Afghanistan does not need to join the global economic community – that it can “go it alone” and ignore globalization – Afghanistan still needs to figure out how it is going to increase per-worker productivity when, for example, over 80% of its women suffer from clinical depression. Ignoring the moral and health issues here for a moment, it shouldn’t even have to be said that clinical depression does not correlate well with high per-worker productivity. Afghanistan’s Minister of Public Health, Dr. Fatamie, recently cited his country’s lack of psychiatrists and actually requested additional assistance from the United States to help remedy this particular problem.⁹ Of course, if the United States even had enough

⁸ Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty. Nov 24, 2007. <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1079190.html> as accessed 25 June 2009.

⁹ Dr. Fatimie, Afghanistan Minister of Public Health. In speech at U.S. Department of Defense sponsored conference “Building Health Security in Afghanistan.” May 15, 2009.

psychiatrists to treat the 12-plus million depressed women in Afghanistan this would be yet another wholly unsustainable intervention added to the long list of currently unsustainable interventions already ongoing in Afghanistan. In addition, the U.S. would only be able to send female psychiatrists since the Afghans generally don't allow women to be treated by male doctors. A culture that does not tolerate female ownership of land or inheritance of property, yet demonstrates widespread tolerance of child physical abuse, sexual abuse, the sale of pre-pubertal girls into forced marriages, routine domestic violence, and severe punishment of rape victims for their "indiscretions" is not a culture that will foster a productive workforce inside, or outside, of the global economy.

Cultural Distance

Our current military strategy focuses almost exclusively on economics and security and completely fails to capitalize on the fact that progress on the cultural front would also serve to protect the population by further isolating the Taliban. A culture that is just two or three notches more modern than what the Taliban would like to impose does not have far to fall in the ideological tug-of-war. It would be unimaginably difficult for the Taliban to make any serious ideological inroads in London, New York, or Sidney, for example, as the population would simply make a mockery of their asinine ideas about how human beings should live their lives. There is simply too much "cultural distance" separating the people of those cities from the Taliban.

Professor Rifaat Hussain, a military expert at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, made this same point to Ben Arnoldy of the Christian Science Monitor when explaining why he thinks the Taliban will never gain influence in Islamabad or the other more progressive areas of Pakistan. "They are a bunch of mountain barbarians," he says, while Mr. Arnoldy elaborates that "coming down from the hills would expose the Taliban to a more secular, urban world that views their way of life as something on the cover of National Geographic."¹⁰ Now if we could only get the Afghan people to also view the Taliban this way, the war would be over.

To Change a Culture

Critics will claim that culture is not something that we can change, or that it's not our job or our "mission" to seek cultural change in Afghanistan. But unless Afghans modernize their culture to allow for economic growth and create cultural distance from the Taliban then we have only two options: stay in the country forever or withdraw our troops in defeat. It is unrealistic to think and dishonest to imply that the Afghan Government, Army, Police, and essential services can continue without the continuous infusion of billions of dollars in direct funding currently being provided by the coalition governments. And it is disingenuous to think that our efforts will be able to bring economic progress if there is not cultural change.

Recent events in Afghanistan have already demonstrated the power the international community actually has to push for cultural change. In March of 2009 the Afghan Parliament passed and President Karzai signed a bill that codified restrictions on Shia Muslim women's ability to leave the home without a male escort – an obvious obstacle to improving per-worker productivity and

¹⁰ Arnoldy, Ben. *Why the Taliban Won't Take Over Pakistan*. Christian Science Monitor. 7 June 2009.

gross national product. Fortunately, and for the first time in this author's recollection, the international community collectively responded with outrage and called upon the Afghans to drop the nonsense. President Obama called the bill "abhorrent"¹¹ and assured reporters that "the views of this administration will be communicated to the Afghan government."¹² The Italians actually threatened to withdraw all of their female service-members in protest, and the Canadian Prime Minister announced the law was "antithetical to our mission in Afghanistan."¹³ And it worked. President Karzai now states that he has "instructed, in consultation with the clergy, that the law be revised."¹⁴

This most recent and relevant example demonstrates that we must never shy away -- in the name of political correctness or cultural sensitivity -- from advocating for what is right. Or, as Thomas Jefferson phrased it more eloquently over 200 years ago, "The interests of a nation when well understood will be found to coincide with its moral duties."¹⁵

And we must hold Afghans to the UN Millennium Development Goals they endorsed in 2004 which declare "obstacles to achieving gender equality need to be overcome through multiple efforts, including the rule of law, awareness creation, and gradually changing cultural practices and mindsets. Above all, it requires political commitment and leadership at the highest levels to take actions that will concretely improve the rights of women."

General Douglas MacArthur certainly understood the interrelationship of culture and economic development. In addition to demoting the emperor to the position of common man and imposing a new constitution that outlawed war and established parliamentary rule, MacArthur spoke of the "essential equality of the sexes," scrubbed inequality from all laws, issued a General Headquarters Order that led to women's suffrage in 1946, made all high schools coed, and oversaw the opening of 26 women's universities and the hiring of 2000 female police officers. MacArthur understood that if Japan were to ever become the thriving participant in the world economy that it is today its culture would have to change. We must learn not just from our mistakes, but also from our successes.

A Fleeting Opportunity

To be clear, there are numerous problems in Afghanistan beyond culture that also cause the global economic community to bypass the entire country. Investors and entrepreneurs can see the lack of security, the poor infrastructure, the uneducated population, and the numerous other obstacles that make Afghanistan a rotten place to invest capital. Even more significant, home-grown innovation and economic growth are being choked internally by endemic corruption at all levels of the Afghan government. These issues are all being discussed daily. The presence of

¹¹ Abawi, Atia. *Afghanistan Rape Law Puts Women's Rights Front and Center*. CNN.com/Asia. 7 April 2009. Accessed June 25, 2009.

¹² Lee, Jesse. Afghanistan and NATO. WhiteHouse.gov posting. April 4, 2009. As accessed from <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/09/04/04/Afghanistan-and-NATO/> on 25 June 2009.

¹³ Silke, Siobhan. *Karzai Backs New Law Curtailing Women's Rights*. France24.com. April 2, 2009. As accessed from <http://www.france24.com/en/20090402-new-law-restricts-rights-women-afghanistan-rape> on 25 June 2009.

¹⁴ Zakaria, Fareed. Interview with Hamid Karzai. CNN. April 19, 2009. As accessed from <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/090419/fzgps.01.html> on 25 June 2009.

¹⁵ Clinton, Hillary. Opening statement during Senate Confirmation Hearing. Jan 13, 2009.

these problems, however, does not diminish in any way the fact that Afghan culture must also change if its economic situation is to improve; and this idea is not being discussed.

If Afghanistan is ever to become a country where its people do not live on the brink of starvation, with infant and maternal mortality rates near the worst in the world, it must change the way it treats 50 percent of its population. If there was ever a time when the developed world was united in collective effort to help Afghanistan do just that, it is now. The horrors of 9/11 have motivated the international community to assist and fund Afghanistan through a very difficult period of transition into the modern world, but Afghans must choose to modify their culture if there is to be any hope for its economy -- and therefore its security and way of life -- to improve. This opportunity may not be around much longer, and it will be a very sad outcome if it is missed. It's time for Afghanistan to choose a new way of life. It's time for change.

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