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Building A Democratic Regime Amid Conflict: The Case of Afghanistan

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In 2002 I flew into Qala-i-Nau District of Badghis Province in northwestern Afghanistan on a UN helicopter to observe a Phase II election for the Emergency Loya Jirga (ELJ), a key step in the transition to democracy then underway in that country. I was serving as one of a handful of international monitors for this process, and this was one of the district elections I had drawn to observe. Not long after we had gotten there, and as we mingled with the electors, some of whom would also be candidates to go on to the ELJ in Kabul, it became quite apparent that one female teacher, fully veiled in the traditional burqa, possessed the education and maturity of thought to be an excellent representative for this district. Although there were a handful of seats set aside for female candidates, here was one woman who appeared worthy of winning an open seat in head-to-head competition

with male candidates. Alas, it was also quite clear that no such outcome was going to occur if the majority male voters had anything to do about it. So, my colleague from the Loya Jirga Commission (LJC) began to joke, in typical Afghan fashion, with the voters. In this land of limited literacy, each candidate had been given a symbol to go along with their name and our female had drawn, by chance, a book. As I stood guard over the entrance to the room with the ballot box, one elector at a time would come forward to cast his/her vote, and my colleague would say something like, "Learning is good, and books are for learning." Everyone would chuckle and in the person would go to cast whatever vote he was going to vote anyway. Finally, the voters grew a bit tired of the joking, which had begun to take on an admonitory tone, and one of them paused on the threshold of going in to vote, looked me in the eye and said, "We are letting them vote this time. In the future maybe some can be elected."

I have never forgotten his earnest effort to educate me on the pace of change in a traditional society like Afghanistan. Thus, I begin with this anecdote to illustrate the complexities of Afghan society which constrain its efforts to make a rapid, successful, and sustainable transition to democracy. Let me add to this beginning four persistent ground realities of Afghanistan.

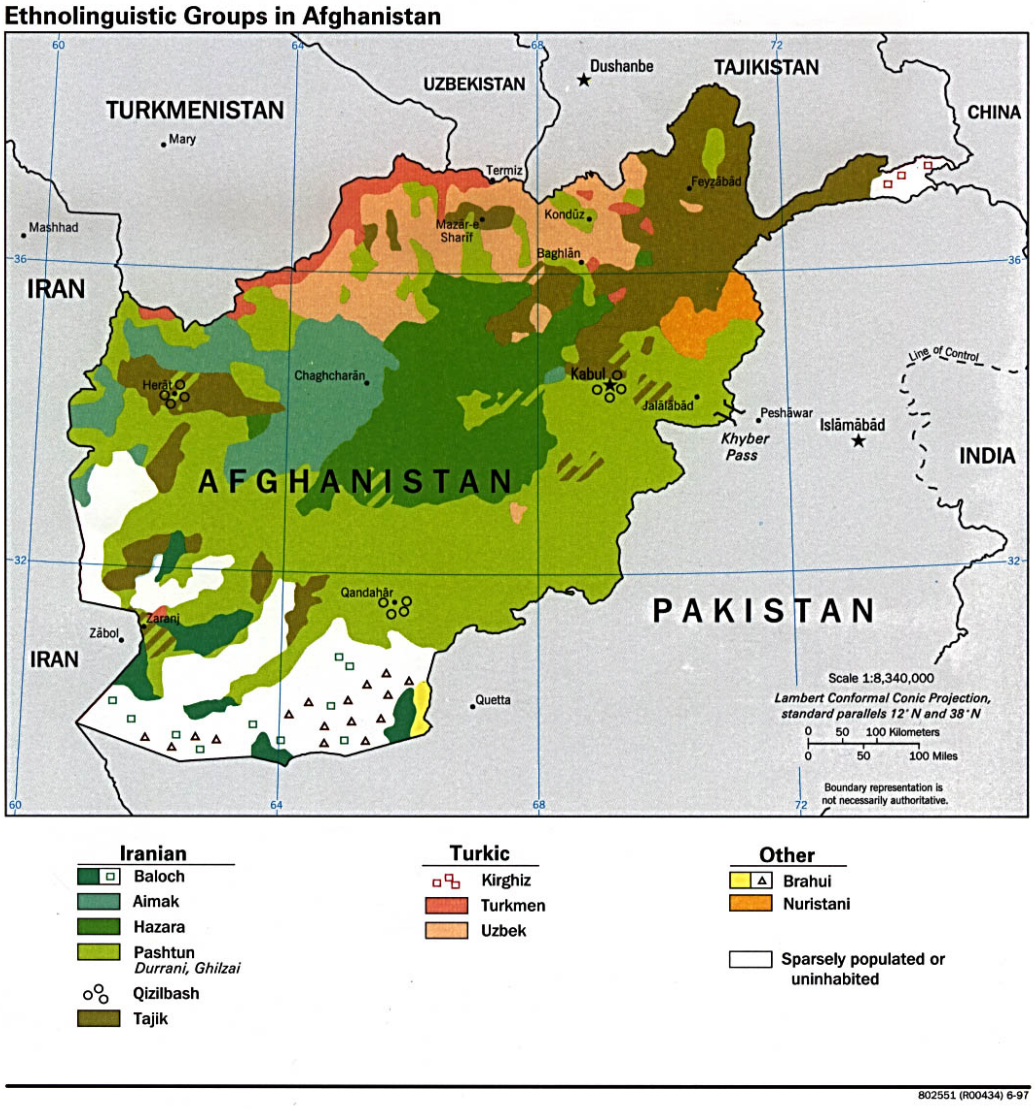
First, the most important thing is the resilience of local identity structures in this country that have historically trumped efforts at state-building. The ethnolinguistic, sectarian, racial, and spatial divisions within Afghanistan are huge and many cleavage lines have resurfaced or been rubbed more raw than is usual by Afghanistan's long and destructive

war. I do not wish to insult anyone's intelligence here, and indeed, the average person knows a great deal more today about Afghanistan than was the norm a few years ago. What I would emphasize is that Afghanistan's deep and multifaceted cleavages tend to be reinforcing. People are divided basically along ethnic and linguistic lines, but sectarian, tribal, and racial divisions also exist, and all of these are reinforced by a spatial pattern of population distribution into different regions of the country. In a country where tribal social groupings still exist, the social system is based on communal loyalties and emphasizes the local over higher-order identity formations. The rugged topographical features and geographical position of Afghanistan, coupled with its lack of economic development, further isolate it internationally and magnify the distance of its people from the government. Often these factors combine to reinforce each other, other times they overlap each other, but collectively they create a complex foundation for modern Afghan politics.

Together, these factors provide the foundation for understanding the difficulty of Afghanistan's initial state-building, especially during the Abdur Rahman period a century ago (1880-1901); their resurgence today gives us insight into the difficulties inherent in Afghanistan's state-*re*building. Afghanistan's ethnic mélange, reinforced by varying Islamic practices and terrain so rugged that dialects can change from one valley to the next, has produced a country where Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and 20-odd other groups tend to live in differing areas and reinforce their differences in numerous ways (religious practice, dialect, facial features, dress, etc.). Most important, Afghanistan today is once again a country defined by localism, and every effort to understand it must

peel away layers of identity to find the core. The recent Northern Alliance, for example, can be understood as a collection of several militias primarily constructed along ethnic lines; or understood *more completely* in terms of each militia having several or multiple factions; or understood *best* as made up of hundreds of small groups of armed men who share local *qawm* identity and who are affiliated with one or another of the larger factions (not always permanently). Afghanistan is also a place shaped profoundly by its history, and although elements of its earlier history are of great importance, such as the traditional national political dominance of the Durrani Pashtuns, its recent history of highly destructive, transformative war has altered the landscape there to the extent that we must be careful drawing too many conclusions about the lessons of Afghanistan's past.

I would suggest that it is here that the US faces one of its greatest strategic weaknesses in regard to nation-building operations—that is, that we just do not possess the requisite knowledge of other cultures to be able to make our efforts to help them develop be anything other than clumsy, and that is when we are well-intentioned. I don't wish to tease this out as another underlying factor but the reality is that when local identity structures enjoy great autonomy then the national government tends to be weak or strong but brittle/limited. This has been the historical pattern since the creation of the modern Afghan state, so it is no surprise that it continues today.



A second underlying factor of great importance is that Afghanistan has no basis for a modern economy. To reduce Barnett Rubin's work on Afghanistan's political economy to an overly simplistic point, prior to the Communist era in Afghanistan the economy in this extremely poor country was overwhelmingly agrarian and that dominated by essentially subsistence farmers and herders. As for the urban economy, it was largely rentier, reliant on Soviet largesse. Afghanistan, then and now, did have a famously active trading culture, which some label a smuggling culture, but until the advent of the poppy

economy, there was little of value smuggled through Afghanistan that was from Afghanistan. All of the higher end products—TVs, refrigerators, air conditioners, and the like—came through Afghanistan. So, as we try to rebuild Afghanistan's economy I always ask David Ricardo's simple question—"In what does Afghanistan have a comparative advantage?" Other than poppy, of course…

Third, and of course I defer to Asta Olesen and Olivier Roy here, but Afghanistan's religious framework is based on a syncretic blend of various interpretations of Islamic doctrine with local customs, making the country simultaneously unified by one faith and divided by hundreds of variations on its practice. Interestingly, Afghanistan is one of the most average of all Muslim countries in two important ways. Demographically, its 82-18% Sunni-Shi'a split closely mirrors the split among the Muslim umma worldwide. Doctrinally, Afghanistan has little that makes it a center point for Muslims. Unlike Saudi Arabia, with Mecca and the Grand Mosque; Egypt, with Al Azhar; Palestine, with the Al-Aqsa Mosque; Syria, with the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus; Iran, with its hawza at Qum, and Iraq, with its hawza at Najaf; and India, with the Darul-Uloom madrassa at Deoband; Afghanistan has nothing. There are no great mosques, mudaris, or anything in this country, which is decidedly part of the Islamic periphery. Consequently, it has long been a place where Islamic practice, as melded with local customs and tribal codes, has unified the people throughout their life cycle events. But, it is also a place particularly susceptible to outside Islamic influences, since pretty much all of the ulema and their philosophy/theology come from elsewhere. Of course, as Charles Allen has recently

chronicled, this includes the mixture of Deobandism and Wahhabism whose most recent manifestation has been the Taliban.

The fourth and last underlying factor that I will take a moment to mention is Afghanistan's geopolitical position on the Asian and global stage. Everyone remembers Afghanistan as the playing field of the Great Game, midwifed into birth by British and Russian empires bent on having a buffer state to prevent their accidental blundering into a disastrous great power war. Prior to that Afghanistan's territory served as the crossroads of Asia, where its Silk Road caravanserais served innumerable invaders and traders crossing the steppes of Inner Asia. Both of these geopolitical characteristics have manifested themselves following the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan and the collapse of the Soviet empire (1989/1992). All regional actors—that is, Pakistan, Iran, India, China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia—see Afghanistan today as both a playing field for a new Great Game and as a crossroads for trade and influence. Thus, all regional actors are attentive to what is happening in Afghanistan and all are appropriately active there in advancing their own interests and attempting to thwart those of their rivals.

Now, to add to these underlying factors of Afghanistan's past and present, I would add a theoretical framework. As in virtually all recent nation-building cases (or, if you prefer, post-conflict stability cases), for post-conflict Afghanistan to undergo successful nation-building several significant challenges would need to be met, and met in a way that reinforced success across these challenges. These were provision of security, relief of displaced populations, rehabilitation of the economy and accompanying reconstruction of

infrastructure, governance (or state-building), and transitional justice. With that theoretical framework as an overview and keeping in mind the underlying characteristics just discussed, I consider key areas of American strategy for Afghanistan and assess how we are faring in each area. Most Americans (and probably most Afghans) would begin with "Destroy Taliban and Al-Qa'ida" and I would give us very low marks here. As I am a professional educator, I'll give us a grade of D in this area. This is not to denigrate US efforts, replete with rules of engagement (ROE) authorizing cross-border hot pursuit and all sorts of lame arm-twisting of Pakistani generals to get them to perform better at anvil and hammer tactics, but we haven't nabbed or nailed the Big Three, nor closed down the operational capacity of either Al-Qa'ida (AQ) or the Taliban (TB), both of which have resurged quite publicly of late. Unless one and/or the other are/is achieved, I do not think we can score this area very high.

What about the areas of nation-building? I will divide nation-building into four areas, setting aside refugee repatriation, which in fact has gone quite well in Afghanistan to date but which has not been that critical to the overall success of the effort there, and give a short assessment of each. First, as everyone always notes, there is Security. In general, security has been fairly good in Afghanistan since 2002, at least as compared to Iraq, but there are some unsettling trends here, the main one of note being a downward trajectory to recent security in Afghanistan, especially along the border with Pakistan. There has been an increase in quantity of attacks and a shift in their tactical quality, with more emphasis on suicide bombings and improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, more use of civilians as shields, and more mobilized efforts against forward operating bases

(FOBs). A more generalized downward trend with regard to attacks on soft targets, especially Afghan civilians, has gone on even longer, but the greater focus by the international media on the dismal security situation in Iraq has allowed this slipping security situation in Afghanistan to simmer along in the shadows. The early breathing space in late 2001 and through much of 2002 afforded the Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) Coalition by the TB/AQ in disarray and the then-focused international community—that is, all of this was pre-Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)—allowed for much progress in security sector reform (SSR), especially in the American-led pillar of Afghan National Army (ANA) and Ministry of Defense (MOD) development. Thus, and again relative to Iraq, Afghanistan has seen much progress over the post-9/11 years in the development of its army and MOD, and the training cycles of its soldiers, with less success on the other pillars of SSR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of militias; Afghan national police (ANP); Ministry of Justice (MOJ); and counter-narcotics (CN), probably in that order). Overall, I give security a B at this point, but that grade is slipping downward.

On Economic Development and Infrastructure Reconstruction the grade is worse, perhaps a C-, which is sad given the amount of effort made in this area. As with all grades, this one is a bit perceptual, which is to say that the cup could be perceived as half-full here rather than half-empty. After all, Afghanistan was enormously destroyed going in to OEF and needed everything reconstructed, and there have been substantial positives on the macroeconomic side, especially with gross domestic product (GDP) growth rates over the past 5 years. But, the half-empty reality is that the drug economy has boomed,

providing much of the impetus to the overall GDP growth rate, and much infrastructure rebuilding in the south has stalled or been forestalled by declining security. Moreover, the project-driven construct of our infrastructure program makes its rebuilding very problematic, while the broader issue of economic development for Afghanistan is almost impossible, since this is a country with a rural underclass that has been off the farm for over a generation and cannot return successfully. Afghanistan never had a robust development picture prior to its quarter-century of war, and it cannot easily construct such a picture now.

As someone who was intimately involved in the State-Building/Governance component of Afghanistan's nation-building project, I feel a sharp desire to report that here, at least, there is something good to say. As some of you know, I managed the electoral processes at the ELJ in 2002, or, to put it more bluntly, I elected Hamid Karzai. This is not to say that I made Karzai president—Zal Khalilzad, Lakhdar Brahimi, and Barney Rubin all had a hand in that—I merely supervised his final, formal election to the post. And so I would love to give this area of Governance a high grade, but even at that first LJ it was clear to the international observers that justice was being sacrificed to expediency, that too many war criminals, warlords, drug lords, and just generally unsavory characters were being allowed into power because the US had decided on a light military footprint that would leverage local guys who controlled guns, some aspect of the illicit economy, or both. As the drug economy took hold and regional actors began (correctly) to conclude that US focus on and staying power in Afghanistan were indeed running out, the Governance part of this project started to decline from its early grade of B to something far lower. Again,

low starting conditions mitigate against the assignment of an even lower grade, but it is a bit like testing someone on reading comprehension of “War and Peace” who scores a bit poorly and then you discover they’ve just learned how to read. You feel like a bit of grade inflation is in order. On the other hand, however, some political maturation just takes time to occur, and patience and a strong stomach are all that is really needed.

The last important pillar for a nation-building country like Afghanistan is Transitional Justice, and in this area we have all failed miserably—the grade is F. What’s more, this is not an area where we are losing ground on initial progress; rather, we made no provision in our initial strategy for this area. I have spoken and written before of how we tried hard in the ELJ process to keep war criminals out of the big tent, only to see everyone who had been anyone in Afghanistan get credentialed and put into the ELJ anyway. The biggest of these folks ended up in the seats of honor down front (which I called “Murderer’s Row”), and it has been downhill ever since, from the point of view of average Ahmed on the streets of Kabul. DDR, for all its statistical successes, and the new Constitution, for all of its provisions that ministers possess some technical competence, have not brought about one simple change for Afghanistan—namely, that people who committed wrongs during the long period of past violence admit to some culpability, or at least a truth and reconciliation process. In such a deeply scarred and troubled society, healing may not be possible without some sort of transitional justice.

Now, I have given US efforts to date fairly low marks, which probably help to suggest how successful the consolidation of democracy in Afghanistan has been, but let me

conclude by looking at three specific questions the organizers asked me to consider. First, "to what extent are core democratic values, such as compromise, influential in addressing the societal cleavages that need to be overcome?" Frequently, when we are asked anthropological questions about Afghan culture, such as this one, the answers are provided according to the Pashtunwali, or code of the Pashtuns, which at most applies to some 40% of the population. The principle of compromise, or rogha in Pashto, does exist among the Pashtuns, and indeed more broadly among Afghans, although it has more relevance in the context of reconciliation between groups that have been in conflict with one another. Male Pashtuns, and again, most Afghans, are also notoriously egalitarian, although females, as my opening anecdote made very clear, do not enjoy equal political or social status. Realistically, though, Afghan society has been transformed utterly by the long war there and is now a narco-state. The khan-malik class of local elites were dispersed by the long conflict, or detached from their sources of patronage and influence, and the new class of local elites are increasingly relying on money generated from the narcotics industry. The era of warlordism and militias also did great damage to the underlying social constructs that might support democracy, especially by pushing people toward local identity formations, as outlined at length above. Moreover, other traditional factors that have been correlated strongly with successful democratic transitions, such as earlier democratic experience, an independent and educated middle class, and a robust civil society, are all essentially absent from present-day Afghanistan. The democratic experiment of the 1960s is too far in the past to be relevant for most Afghans, the most educated and wealthy of which fled abroad and have made their lives in diaspora. In the capacity gap that resulted from this refugee exodus, civil society organizations came

largely from abroad and operated on the fringes of government. There has been only limited success at reestablishing such organizations in Afghanistan. Overall then, the indicators for democratic transition in Afghanistan are bad. This is not a place that will embrace democracy enthusiastically, and the difficulties will be exacerbated by resistance from increasingly enriched and entrenched elites.

Second, what are some "guiding lessons for building democracy in the midst of religious, ethnic or other divisions?" In light of the foregoing, it may seem that Afghanistan offers us little in the way of useful guiding lessons, but there is one important thing that it can teach us—democratic transitions in divided societies where conflict continues are unlikely to take root for a considerable period of time. If we commit to fostering such a transition, we must make certain that we can and will stay the course, or we will likely make it more difficult down the road. It is entirely likely that over time the kind of societal change that can produce a supportive environment for democracy in states that are now pre-democratic in orientation will occur, but it is almost certainly the case that democracy is not the first priority to people in those circumstances. Usually, higher-order goods like security and economic well-being must be satisfied first, especially when traditional forms of governance that may have been authoritarian but effective have been disrupted by conflict and/or societal transition.

A lesser but not unimportant lesson occurs to me in response to the third question, which is, "are we asking too much of democratic process (ie., elections)?" The broad answer here is "yes, we are," because democratic processes in a place like Afghanistan tend to

reinforce preexisting local identity orientation rather than produce the kind of mature democracy found in developed Western societies. Having said that, though, I have maintained consistently that for Afghanistan the beauty of democratic processes, if we can stay the course, is that over time they transform ethnically-based warlords and drug traffickers into sleazy ward bosses and petty politicians—not, perhaps, unlike some US Congressmen or national representatives in other governments—and that is progress for a faction-riven and conflict-ridden society like Afghanistan. Of course, some psephological tricks and other basics of political science can hasten a democratic transition, although they must be appropriate to the cultural circumstances of the case in question. In Afghanistan, the use of the single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system with candidates having to stand as individuals rather than as members of competing parties for the 2005 Wolesi Jirga (lower house) election is an example of how not to use basic political science advantageously. This system appears to be undergoing reform prior to the 2009 elections, and such changes are in keeping with the maturation of democratic processes in fledgling democracies, but a more proportional system and an orientation toward greater consociational processes might have gone further from the start to help move Afghanistan along in its democratic transition.

Can an effective transition to stable democracy, of any sort, occur in Afghanistan today? Unfortunately, there are quite significant negatives that are making this very difficult. Most significant is the ongoing conflict by primarily indigenous Afghan forces against the Karzai regime. These forces are the resurgent Taliban, or neo-Taliban as some call them, who again have Pakistani support despite ongoing US pressures to push Pakistan

into a more ally-friendly position. Perhaps the pressure on Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf to form a more moderate government with less of a role for the Muttahida Majlies-e-Amal (MMA) will lead to a decline of the Talibanization that has deepened along the frontier over these past few years, but more likely, Pakistan will continue to play both sides against the middle, in part at least to keep the lid on militant Islamism at home and in part to maintain an ethnically Pashtun proxy in Afghanistan. Why the Taliban have resurged strikes me as one of the most frustrating questions for any of us to have to deal with, because of course they were going to resurge! They were not really crushed, most of them just went home in late 2001 or early 2002 when they saw which way the wind was blowing. Or they went to Pakistan, where they could have sanctuary and the Pakistani Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) could prep them for another round, which following the handover of the Eastern Zone combat space to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), now from the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), many in Pakistan believed had come. Moreover, as Tom Johnson and Chris Mason have ably documented in several recent papers, the decision to construct a Kabul government that systematically excluded the non-Durrani Pashtuns (especially the Ghilzai and Ghurghust) has done a great deal to alienate those Pashtuns and drive them into the anti-regime ranks. More generally, the United States never figured out how to have a proper reconciliation with the Taliban, whose early alienation was a clear by-product of the strategic approach the US adopted from the outset.

The booming narcotics sub-sector of the rural and trading economies is a second persistent negative. The data here seem to worsen every year, such that now Afghanistan

is a narco-state, as Ashraf Ghani once presciently warned us it would be. According to Wordnet Dictionary, a narco-state is "an area that has been taken over and is controlled and corrupted by drug cartels and where law enforcement is effectively nonexistent," which, of course, sounds exactly like Afghanistan.

A narco-state always has a very high rate of corruption, which Transparency International does not reveal for Afghanistan because it is one of a relatively few countries for which data are inadequate. But our anecdotal knowledge of the corruption in Afghanistan tells us that it is very high, and extremely debilitating to the recovery of this war-torn society. The problem, as with Iraq, is exacerbated by the local-identity orientation of Afghan society, and the low levels of personal security, and the uncertain economic conditions, all of which combine for people to try to get whatever they can as early as they can. With regular reports of the heroin trade having infected the highest levels of the government with its corrupting influence, to include Wali Karzai, younger brother of Hamid Karzai, but many others, as well, it is hard to imagine that this narco-state can stabilize itself in the time that remains for international community engagement.

Which leads me to my last point on the negative side of the ledger, the growing problem of alliance management. As someone who advocated (and worked to realize) NATO involvement in Afghanistan, I regret to say that I did not see the downside of this policy. I saw, and still see, substantial upside to all the international community involvement in Afghanistan, the absence of which continue to make the looming disaster in Iraq all the more problematic for the US. Having said that, though, there is no question that alliance

management has been a challenge in Afghanistan, from the flawed SSR pillars of various other lead donor nations to the national caveats of various European security partners to the rather underwhelming support for the Afghan mission in key alliance country publics. The reality is that, sooner or later, this alliance will crack in Afghanistan, as one or another (or more) of the countries chooses to go home. And then what? Bringing NATO into the fight has not substantially increased combat power there—rather it has increased the political commitment to the mission when no one wanted to do Iraq—but failure for NATO in Afghanistan would likely be disastrous for that organization, in ways that failure for the US in Iraq likely will not be. So, the potential downside is very great.

I appreciate your attentiveness until this point. As I build now to the grand finale, I wish to say a few words about the future of Afghanistan and the three regions—Central, South, and Southwest Asia—that it anchors. I have painted a fairly dismal picture of the situation in Afghanistan, but I do not mean for it to be unremittingly gloomy, for indeed, there is much to celebrate in Afghanistan. The sad reality is that there could and should be much more to celebrate there, were our initial policies not so hamstrung by senior policymaking aversion to nation-building, neo-conservative commitment to abandoning the Afghan project for the more lucrative target of Iraq, the growing anti-Americanism of Islamists due in large measure to both of the foregoing mistakes, and the willingness of other actors—especially, but not solely, American rivals—to make moves of their own. Especially interesting in regard to this last point are the activities of three regional actors, one of which is a rising great power rival to the US. Pakistan, as has already been mentioned, has a long investment in Afghanistan, whose societal collapse spilled over

into Pakistan, causing the Talibanization, Kalashnikovization, and heroinchi ills faced by that country. Pakistan believes with great reason that its investment in Afghanistan must pay off and sees Indian Research and Analysis Wing (RAW is India's foreign intelligence agency) agents behind every rock in eastern Afghanistan while it sees Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) agents behind every dust mound in western Afghanistan. Hence, Pakistan's willingness to allow Taliban and other associated groups engage in cross-border activities in Afghanistan. Iran is the second regional player whose involvement in Afghanistan has been quietly of note. It has no natural rival for influence in western Afghanistan, where its commercial activities have provided both a point of ingress into Afghan society and a beginning point for intelligence operations. Lastly, Afghanistan has become fertile ground for China's re-entry to the Great Game in Central Asia as well as a wider corridor for Chinese overland influence in Pakistan, especially the strategically significant, resource-rich, and under-populated barren wasteland of Balochistan.

All of these regional actors illustrate a reality of Afghanistan's future, which is that it will be as it always has been—an Asian future. Although many Afghans are especially fond of the US and most things American, as they have been for many decades, it does not take strategic genius for them to see that America will not be in Afghanistan's neighborhood for much longer, at least to a level that can shape decisively its future. As America has left or ignored Afghanistan in the past, so it will in the future, since the strategic imperatives that shapeUS involvement so far from the homeland remain for now essentially unchanged. Afghanistan is not that significant to the US, so long as its state

failure does not dip to the crisis level of allowing the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida or similar such organizations to threaten American security. The US can lead from afar, or stay and lead there, but in the same way that we engage in Nepal, or Bangladesh, or other lesser Asian states. The US is too far away, too self-centered, and too focused on higher profile strategic interests to remain the biggest player in Afghanistan for much longer.

So Afghanistan's future is most likely one that will be shaped more by actors other than the US. Yet continued US engagement is crucial both to Afghanistan having a stable future and the US having a secure one. Given that the US is headed to failure in Iraq, the US must not fail in Afghanistan. To avoid failure there the US must commit to staying, by exercising the kind of strategic engagement and patience that runs so counter to American foreign policy. Thus, I wonder what US exit strategy for Afghanistan should be. It began and has largely stayed a "Vietnamization" strategy, as has US strategy for Iraq—namely, that America build indigenous Afghan institutions, especially its government and security forces, so that the US can hand off control of the country to them, allowing the US to take its highly professional (and highly expensive) military home, or elsewhere. This strategy, however, has shown little sign of working, and the impending failure in Iraq will imperil US efforts in Afghanistan in manifest ways. To really rebuild a country's institutions you have to understand that country and the regional milieu it sits within. The US does not, and never really has had the aptitude for it, and now that it has become essential to US national security the US has been mighty slow to embrace this challenge.

A second factor is that most Americans could care less about nation-building, certainly not for humanitarian reasons. If the US has to engage in such silly nonsense, there had better be a pretty damn good strategic reason and it had better not be very costly. To America's xenophobes, though, there are virtually no good reasons to do nation-building, which leaves America with this vexing problem—what happens when Usama bin Laden (UBL) and Ayman Al-Zawahairi (AAZ) are finally caught, killed, or exfiltrate from the region? Why, then, will America be in Afghanistan? Perhaps the Afghan diaspora in Northern Virginia and California can exert a similar influence on American foreign policy to the influence brought by Zionist Jews in the late 1940s, but most likely Afghanistan will slip back to its accustomed back burner spot on the American foreign policy stove. At that point, "Afghanization" or not, America will go home.

Or, perhaps not. Perhaps in the new US foreign policy, Afghanistan is too important to abandon. Perhaps here we will see, correctly, a confluence of grand strategic imperatives to stay with the most important test case for an effective anti-militant Islamist foreign policy anywhere—that is, a robust and successful nation-building effort. We need Afghanistan—indeed, we always have—and perhaps now we can begin to see that. And Afghanistan needs the US. So, can the US really afford to leave?

Thank you for your kind attention.