

**The Unfinished War in Afghanistan:
National Governance Dilemma and Geopolitical Imperatives**

April 2003

An occasional paper of the
Foundation for Central Asian Development
Charles Santos, Elizabeth Cabot, and Paul Behrends
New York, New York

Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	Page 3
Introduction.....	Page 4
American Objectives and Early Support for a New Government.....	Page 5
U.S. Policy in Favor of a Centralized State.....	Page 6
The Transitional Government: Worrying Clues and Trends.....	Page 7
The US Versus Them Mentality.....	Page 8
The Failure of Centralization.....	Page 9
Historical Context.....	Page 10
The Persistence of Extremism and the Decentralized Solution.....	Page 12
What Works – What Doesn’t.....	Page 14
The Way Ahead: Policy Prescriptions.....	Page 14

Charles Santos, an energy consultant and Director of Foundation for Central Asian Development, was previously a UN Political Advisor in Afghanistan, and Vice-President of CENTGAS Consortium

Elizabeth Cabot, President of Foundation for Central Asian Development, was previously Executive Director of Minority Rights Group (USA).

Paul Behrends, Senior Vice President, Rhoads Weber Shandwick, and is a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve, and formerly a staff member in the U.S. House of Representatives.

The **Foundation for Central Asian Development** (previously the Afghan Development Foundation) is a 501(c)3 which facilitates inter-ethnic cooperation, humanitarian assistance and reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan and Central Asian since 1997.

Executive Summary

At the end of 2001, the Taliban and al-Qaeda were broken and in utter confusion. Today, they are stronger and more active than at any time since their defeat. They have re-emerged forcefully in their base in the south and eastern regions of Afghanistan, as well as in the capital city of Kabul. Popular support for the Afghan government is eroding as expectations for both a fully representative government and the rebuilding of the country remain unmet. How is it that the U.S. won the war but risks losing the peace?

U.S. objectives for ensuring a pro-American, anti-terrorist moderate Afghan government have been undermined by its policy supporting a strong, centralized Afghan state. The current system does not permit local or regional political leadership to be elected or local governmental structures to be formed. Rather, exclusive effort has been placed on forging and reinforcing national political structures. While this approach suits the desires of the Kabul administration, it has led in fact to the overall weakening of the Afghan state.

This has come about in two ways. Understanding Afghanistan's regional dynamics explains why Kabul has been pursuing a confrontational position with the non-Pashtun regions. In so doing, it has ignored the increasing challenges by the Pashtun southern and eastern regions. This approach has not only given the Taliban an enormous opportunity to regroup and reorganize, but it has created further mistrust and alienation among the non-Pashtun communities.

Meanwhile, centralization has played directly into the religious and nationalist extremists' hands. Afghanistan is essentially a country of minorities, and while centralization has been attempted many times, it never succeeded without brutal oppression and outside intervention. Centralization has historically been a tool of repression, and in the wake of the Taliban regime, not to mention previous attempts at forging a single national ethnic, religious and cultural identity, any attempt to do so again will further antagonize the deeply polarized communities in Afghanistan.

A decentralized political structure would begin to repair the fractured minority relations and provide Afghans a viable democracy. Of equal importance, decentralization will counter the extremists by undermining their ambition – and ability – to control the country through the proxy center of Kabul. Specific policy recommendations include investigating alternative political structures such as federalism or con-federalism, and taking a more balanced approach to the regions.

Introduction

At the end of 2001, the Taliban and al-Qaeda were broken and in utter confusion. Today, they are stronger and more active than at any time since their defeat. They have re-emerged forcefully in their base in the southern and eastern regions of Afghanistan, but equally worrying is their re-emergence in the capital city of Kabul, challenging the newly established, pro-American Afghan government. How is has it come to pass that the U.S. won the war but risks losing the peace?

After all, U.S. policy has been formulated to help shape support for a democratic system in Afghanistan, and create another legitimate model for the Islamic world. And more than two decades of occupation and civil war on, most Afghans do crave democracy and hunger to take control of their own destiny. Yet popular support for the Afghan government is eroding as expectations for both a fully representative government and the rebuilding of the country remain unmet.

By any measure, the Karzai administration is faced with a Herculean task in Afghanistan, and the prospect of leading the nation is a daunting challenge. But there are specific policies of that administration which the U.S. has embraced – and reinforced – that actually contribute to the instability. In the process of creating a highly centralized state, both Kabul and the U.S. seem to be ignoring political realities on the ground, and are – inadvertently or not – encouraging the ethnic and religious extremists.

The dramatic increase in attacks by Taliban remnants that have mutated into a guerilla movement using infiltration and hit-and-run tactics is symptomatic of a larger disease. Far from being discredited and destroyed by the U.S. military campaign, or the Karzai interim government, the extremists increasingly target U.S. and international military personnel, U.N. personnel and foreign aid workers. Particularly in the south and eastern parts of the country, terrorist activities are happening on a weekly – and sometimes daily – basis.

And for many non-Pashtuns there is a growing suspicion that radical Pashtuns have substituted neckties for turbans and have begun to make their presence felt in the fledgling Afghan interim government. The policy alarm bells should be ringing loudly enough to revisit our original assumptions and objectives. The following paper outlines the background discussion and proposes policy recommendations that would reduce ethnic divisions and strengthen the Afghan state.

Specifically, this paper argues that a decentralized political structure would provide the most realistic solution to a durable peace, and provide Afghans a viable democracy. Of equal importance, decentralization will counter the extremists by undermining their ambition – and ability – to control the country through the proxy center

of Kabul.

American Objectives and Early Support for a New Government

The United States and its anti-terror coalition partners have set several overlapping objectives for an post-Taliban Afghan government, which are to:

- Ensure that there is no return to an extremist terrorist state where terrorists could gather to train, plan, and coordinate terror activities;
- Establish political stability within a democratic system and restore civic order;
- Maintain the territorial integrity of the state through a broad-based government that enjoys the support of the Afghan people;
- Revitalize the economy and the educational system, and bolster civil society institutions; and
- Highlight success in Afghanistan as a public diplomacy case study to other nations so that the benefits of supporting American goals and values are self-evident.

The U.S. provided considerable support – both political and financial – for the processes leading to a new Afghan national government. As the Taliban regime was collapsing, a U.N.-sponsored initiative with U.S. blessing brought some three dozen Afghans to Bonn, Germany to begin discussions about the new government. Along with the Northern Alliance, members of three Afghan mediation ‘processes’ were assembled, out of which Karzai was picked by the U.N. to lead the Afghan Interim Authority.¹ Under controversial circumstances, this election was ratified by a traditional Afghan consultative *Loya Jirga* process held the following June 2002, and Hamid Karzai emerged President of the Transitional Islamic State of Afghanistan. His administration has been charged with undertaking nation-wide elections in 2004.

If the U.N. established the political procedures and a specific administration for the Afghans, the U.S. reinforced these political initiatives in many smaller ways. America has provided significant logistical support for the Afghan administration, such as U.S. funded transport, technical advice and American security detail for President Karzai. The particular concern with Karzai’s protection is pronounced and has led, according to one cabinet minister, to such anomalies as senior cabinet ministers having to

¹ These ‘processes’ included the ‘Peshawar’ process, the ‘Cyprus’ process, and the ‘Rome’ process (which included the former King of Afghanistan, as well as Hamid Karzai). The Northern Alliance was led by the Panshiri Tajiks who had inherited the mantle of the recently assassinated Ahmed Shah Massoud. Most of the Bonn delegates lived outside Afghanistan, and of all the groups only the former King, Zahir Shah, could claim to have something of the mandate of a broad cross-section of the Afghan people. Accordingly, Zahir Shah was given authority to suggest a Prime Minister, which he delegated to the members of his ‘process’ to elect. One of their members, Professor Sattar Sirat, emerged the choice of the group (11 out of 14 votes), but the U.N. mediator overruled them in favor of Karzai because, according to Professor Sirat, the latter was Pashtun while Sirat was not.

undergo metal detector and dog-sniffing searches before meetings with the President, and the American security detail sitting in on cabinet meetings.

Even more important, perhaps, is the U.S. financial assistance. As the largest national donor, the U.S. has channeled, by Afghan estimates, almost U.S. \$700 million in humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to the country in the two years since March 2001.² Altogether, such assistance is intended not only to reinforce the authority of the Karzai government, but to begin the process of rebuilding critical infrastructure and returning Afghanistan to the community of nations.

U.S. Policy in Favor of a Centralized State

Until now, the U.S. has not encouraged any political development outside of Kabul and the Karzai administration, and the current system does not permit local or regional political leadership to be elected or local governmental structures to be formed. Instead, a policy focusing single-mindedly on building a strong center was developed in tandem with both Afghan central government desires and international nation-building experience. U.S. policy makers have reasoned that a strong center, with a pro-American leader, can resist the revival of an anti-Western, fundamentalist threat or its neighbors' tendency to meddle in her internal politics. The U.S. also believes that a centralized government is the preferred mechanism for managing the distribution of the billions pledged towards the country's reconstruction³.

Centralization is one, albeit crucial, part of the larger U.S. and Kabul policy, which is to rebuild – and in some instances build from scratch – the entire state immediately. This must surely be one of the most ambitious programs of nation-building ever devised, and the time table was planned for just a few years. National institutions as diverse as the executive, the legislative, the judiciary, a banking system, a press and media, an army, a police force, a country-wide school system, and a health system are being largely formed anew out of the administrative vacuum left by the Taliban regime and prior civil war. A constitution is to be written, an economy revived, human rights abuses redressed, the historically appalling situation of women in Afghanistan rectified and millions of refugees repatriated. Meanwhile Afghanistan is still in the process of formulating the terms of a political legitimacy that could bind the wounds of twenty years of state failure, and a century of brutality and erratic and incomplete progress.

² The rest of the international community has contributed another U.S. \$1.2 billion. Source: *Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority DAD* online database.

³ A preliminary needs assessment in January 2002 in advance of the Tokyo donor summit by the World Bank, UNDP and the Asian Development Bank estimated reconstruction costs for Afghanistan at US \$15 billion. (See World Bank News Release 2002/178/SAR.) To date, most reconstruction money has gone through international non-governmental organizations or UN agencies because of the lack of basic governmental capacity. The US, which is the largest donor, has said that this practice is scheduled to be diminished in 2003, when it will go to Kabul directly (through an Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund). See *Pentagon briefing by Joe Collins, December 19, 2002*. Material on the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund can be found on World Bank online at www.worldbank.org/

If this appears a monumental task, the U.S. does not appear overly concerned. There is no doubt an intellectual attraction to managing the complex process of national transformation through a trusted centralized government in Kabul. The simplicity inherent in a 'one-stop-shop' for managing the daunting complications of Afghan ethnic and tribal relations, not to mention the billions pledged towards the country's reconstruction are easily apparent. President Karzai's appeal as a focus for a moderate, new Afghanistan is also apparent. But U.S. support for such a centralized political state should be a deliberate decision based on facts on the ground, and not the result of bureaucratic inertia. Such a policy posture hardly helped the outcome for the former Soviet Union, the former Yugoslavia, or current day Indonesia, no matter how much policy makers wished otherwise.

While all these goals of nation-building are absolutely worth pursuing in the long run, the time frames are utterly unrealistic. Worse, the general expectation for immediate solutions have led to widespread disillusion with the Karzai government, and increasingly even with the U.S. and the international community. Short-order nation building may suit the desire to move beyond Afghanistan's problems quickly, but twenty years or more of political context cannot be wished away so easily. Meanwhile, regional leaders have begun to manage, without help from the central government, to tackle the daily problems faced by Afghans throughout the country. Without a better sense of what is happening on the ground and where the country is going, the U.S. policy of centralization is in real danger of seriously undermining U.S. objectives.

The Transitional Government: Worrying Clues and Trends

Despite the U.S. and coalition forces support, the current government is not effective beyond Kabul. Indeed, it is unable to prevent growing insecurity and instability *within* the capital - despite the assistance of some 5,000+ International Security Force for Afghanistan (ISAF) military personnel⁴.

Rebuilding Afghanistan will be no easy task, and this commentary aims to focus on structures and institutions, rather than personalities and individuals. Nevertheless, at the same time that conditions are deteriorating at the center and in certain regions, concern about lack of reconstruction momentum is building. The hesitation to fulfill international pledges follows a circular logic: the apparent weakness of the Afghan government renders much of the country unstable and insecure – yet instability will only increase if the environment remains devoid of the means to rebuild an economic future.

And the Karzai administration knows that survival is precarious if it cannot bring about the twin requirements of stability and economic revitalization. All the same, it has chosen to address the issue of instability in contradictory ways. Having declared the war with the Taliban for all intents and purposes over, Kabul has also attributed the current instability to its own weak grip on the country. The more independent the region, it is

⁴ See among many citations "Afghanistan. Concern over crime in Kabul" January 20, 2003 (IRIN) at www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=31798&SelectRegion=Central_Asia&SelectCountry=AFGHANISTAN

implied, the greater the insecurity and 'warlordism'. To rectify this position, Mr. Karzai has called for the expansion of ISAF beyond Kabul to other cities. He belatedly acknowledged lack of support for this, and is now promoting the establishment of a national army of 60,000 within six years – by most estimates an impossible goal.

The Us versus Them Mentality

Yet even as ISAF protects just the security in Kabul, conditions in some of the most ostensibly independent regions are more stable than in the capital. In the north, one of the regional leaders, General Dostum, has initiated a disarmament process without the help of Kabul and has begun the reconstruction – again without any U.N. or central government backing – of roads, schools, and other infrastructure. In the west, the commonly touted 'warlord' Ismail Khan has managed to make the city of Herat much safer through a disarmament process as well, even though he has recently faced several challengers and challenges that will be discussed shortly.

The Karzai administration has failed not only to acknowledge the relatively improved conditions in the northern and western regions but has singled them out for confrontation. At the same time, it has been far less vocal about the instability in the south and east, as well as in Kabul until very recently. Similarly, it has been reluctant to tackle the increasing extremism within its own administration and within the other government branches. Recent judicial rulings, for example, from the highest Afghan court banning cable television and coeducation drew virtually no response by the Karzai administration until forced to by both popular and international outrage⁵.

The matter of the Taliban prisoners remaining in the north is another example of the sort of inconsistency which characterizes the Karzai administration. Following pressure from the capital, approximately 3,200 of the original 4,200 Taliban and al-Qaeda members captured after the fall of Mazar were released from prison in the north and returned home to the south and eastern provinces. The remaining 1,000 are still deemed too dangerous to free at this point. However, once home, some of the former prisoners mounted attacks on U.S. military and one attempted to assassinate Karzai in Kandahar. In an interview with one of the authors, remaining prisoners were perfectly frank about their desire to 'kill Americans'. Yet despite the threat that these fighters pose to the U.S., to the Karzai administration, and to the regions in which they were captured, Karzai has repeatedly insisted that they be released immediately.

While this account largely focuses on the different approach of Kabul in the north and west versus the south and east, a word must be included regarding Kabul's treatment

⁵ Issued by Chief Justice Shinwari, a Karzai appointee and a well-known fundamentalist and Pashtun nationalist. Shinwari has been a strong proponent of centralization, and has also ruled in favor of Karzai's substantial power to rule by decree. These and similar incidents have prompted, among other responses, the establishment of a new political party this past March, the National Democratic Front, to address the attempts to crush liberal tendencies in the current administration.

of the Hazara region in the central highlands of Afghanistan. These Shia minority peoples were especially persecuted by the Taliban, who massacred the population in their tens of thousands, destroyed their cultural monuments and attempted to starve the remaining population by blocking all road routes in. The Taliban also destroyed a number of villages claiming 'grazing rights' over these non-Pashtun lands for the Pashtun nomadic Kuchis.

Such was the decimation of the population and resistance that Kabul has made little of 'warlords' in the region and the Hazaras have been fairly subdued. But that should not be interpreted as trust in the government. Since Karzai attempted to reduce their proportional allotment of delegates to the *Loya Jirga*⁶, the Hazaras have grown increasingly apprehensive. Recent concerns include claims by members of the Karzai cabinet reviving the 'grazing rights' of the Kuchis on Hazara lands, and Karzai's trip to Bamyan during which he failed to visit the well-documented and visible mass graves. This in contrast to his repeated calls for investigations into *alleged* massacres of Taliban fighters in Mazar (but seemingly not into the massacres of the civilian resistance in those areas). The contrast has not gone unnoticed.

These and other actions illustrate the fact that stability, much less an inclusive, even-handed approach, simply is not a priority of the Kabul administration. Instead the issue of stability is used as a tool for economically and politically isolating the non-Pashtun regions and de-legitimizing their leadership. What the government in Kabul is clearly promoting then, is not just a Kabul-centric policy, but a Pashtun-centric policy. And this is the root of all the political rivalry between the center and those regions.

This rivalry explains the recent instability outside Herat referred to above. Reported as being between rival 'warlords', the challenges to Ismail Khan in fact came from former Taliban commanders, and even appear to have been encouraged by some members of the Karzai administration. One instance occurred recently in Baghdis, following an order issued by the Minister of Frontier Affairs, Arif Noorzai, authorizing a local Pashtun and former Taliban commander to establish a military brigade to challenge Ismail Khan. Another occurred outside Shindand last December when another former Taliban commander succeeded in taking several villages.

Naturally, the attempt to undermine non-Pashtun regions is part of shoring up support in the Pashtun areas. This also explains why Kabul was reluctant to discuss instability in the south and east until it became too glaringly obvious. But there are many worrying signs that the Afghan government's approach has failed to win that support. Significantly, both attempts on President Karzai's life, as well as the assassinations of two of his ministers, and a recent assassination of a government envoy, occurred in Kabul or the southern and eastern parts of the country.⁷

⁶ by claiming certain Hazara areas as Pashtun in Gardez, Uruzghan and Ghazni

⁷ Another example of this unbalanced approach was when Kabul tacitly supported the USAID's withdrawal from northern Afghanistan after the rape of an aid worker last June. Yet USAID and Kabul supported a major road reconstruction project from Kabul to Kandahar proposed immediately after the assassination attempt on Karzai in Kandahar.

Such confrontations with the non-Pashtun areas while attempting to shore up support elsewhere have given the Taliban significant new opportunities to reorganize. Not understanding these dynamics, the international community has continued to support Kabul's approach. For now, U.S. military provides a safety net in the south and the east in the event of an effective Taliban challenge.⁸ But over time, any administration in Kabul will be forced to turn to the non-Pashtun regions and their leaders to help if it is serious about containing the Taliban.

The Failure of Centralization

It is clear that the Karzai government is determined to suppress the non-Pashtun regions and their leaders. So how they manage to be so strong?

One of the most crucial misunderstandings of the Afghan dilemma is rooted in the very language that describes typical nation-states. For if Afghanistan has regions, so it must have a center, and if there are 'minorities', so there must be some 'majority'.

Actually, neither is the case. From the perspective of many of the regions, Kabul looks not so much a capital as another region, and one that is increasingly disconnected. But while the Pashtuns are the largest ethnic group in the country, and have historically ruled, they are not a majority - and even as the largest group they have generally fractured into various sub-groups, tribes, clans and other primary affiliations.⁹

It is, in short, a country of minorities, the outcome of living at the intersection of the three regional historical powers of the last half millennium. In the aftermath of communist rule, a devastating civil war and the Taliban regime, there will be no peace without restoring the confidence of the communities who have been traumatized by the numerous campaigns to homogenize the Afghans. Another centralizing attempt will only compound the enormous distrust among the ethnic communities and further alienate them from the center and each other.

Historical Context

Therein lies a significant lesson for the United States today. Failure to fully

⁸ This military presence has been largely composed of 5000-7000+ US forces who appear to be reorganizing into "Provisional Reconstruction Teams" (PMTs). These teams will be composed also of non-military civilians, and installed in six areas to provide both security and an organizational unit for reconstruction projects. While this is controversial, at least with the NGO community who fear that both the security component is weakened while the humanitarian/reconstruction component is confused for the local populations, one PMT has already been established in the southern city of Gardez. For more, see www.irinnews.org/report.asp?ReportID=32083&SelectRegion=Central_Asia&SelectCountry=AFGHANISTAN

⁹ Other main minority groups in Afghanistan include Tajiks, Hazara, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Nuristanis, as well as many others.

centralize was not due to lack of nerve or force, as the historical record of the Afghan nation will attest. Centralizing essentially amounted to 'Pashtunizing' the country, a daunting task given the scale of the diversity, and it always required foreign intervention to sustain the subjugation of the non-Pashtun peoples. In the late 19th century the 'Iron Amir', Abdur Rahman, ceded significant aspects of Afghan sovereignty, including foreign policy and borders, to the British in return for weapons, money and a free hand to suppress the non-Pashtun peoples. He also ceded a sizeable lands populated by Pashtuns to the British, rendering the group divided today between Afghanistan and Pakistan (which accounts for the porous border conditions)¹⁰. More recently, the Taliban's thrust into the northern areas beyond Pashtun lands increasingly relied on massive Pakistani help - and eventually al-Qaeda resources and military assistance as well.

Always there, the complexity of the Afghan nation and ethnic affiliation increased in the aftermath of the civil war in the early 1990s. Identity politics were already paramount, because the various 20th century campaigns by the Afghan government to create a modern Pashtun state out of Afghanistan had polarized the non-Pashtun peoples. These modernizing forces also viewed the rural, traditional Pashtun tribal leaders as impediments. Some of these leaders were undermined and then actively persecuted during the more severe campaigns to centralize and modernize, particularly under the worst abuses of the communist period.

That these events led eventually to the Taliban is well known, with their punitive regime based on Pashtun village and tribal norms. What is often obscured in the many descriptions of the Taliban as medieval or as a 'backlash,' however, is how the movement was in fact a sophisticated consolidation of prior attempts to centralize and homogenize the country. Highly fluent in the language of political manipulation and symbols, the regime represented a significant effort to unite and integrate the Pashtun peoples within fundamentalist Sunni principles, traditional Pashtun values and deeply embedded nationalist notions¹¹. This explains the regime's widespread support even among many former Pashtun members of the Communist party (especially the *Khalqis*) and educated Pashtun exiles - including many exile Pashtun women.

And the fusion of a century-long nationalist program of ethnic domination with universalist Sunni fundamentalism eventually bound the Taliban loyally to al-Qaeda, as well, who saw in the Afghan Taliban the purest form of fundamentalist Islam. The Taliban's brutal suppression of non-Pashtuns is amply recorded. It should be recalled, however, that the Taliban never identified themselves as a political party, but rather as a national movement, thus rendering all contestants to Taliban rule illegitimate. Communities resisting 'Pashtunization' were 'infidels', their leaders 'warlords' or worse.

¹⁰ The discussion is incomplete without a brief reference to the efforts by Afghanistan to create an independent Pashtunistan out of the Pakistan Pashtun areas, promoted especially by Prime Minister Daoud in the 1950s. These efforts created enormous antagonism with Pakistan as it was perceived as an attempt by Afghanistan to reclaim the area eventually, and so contributed to Pakistan's eventual support of Taliban claims over Afghanistan as a way to defuse the Pashtunistan issue.

¹¹ Even the notion of the Taliban as being 'simple' village mullahs was in fact something of a fabrication, for many of the leaders of the movement were largely raised in Pakistani refugee camps, and educated in radical Islamic *madrassas* quite out of tradition back in Afghanistan until the Taliban's arrival.

While the Taliban enjoyed enormous public support in their Pashtun areas, their military push to the north and west drew large civilian resistance, leading to large civilian massacres. The greatest were undoubtedly borne by the Hazara peoples in Mazar-i Sharif and Bamyan city, but to this day there are still tens of thousands of missing Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmens.¹² The Taliban's mission in non-Pashtun regions resulted in even greater Pashtun popular support, because it restored authority over areas that historically that have been seen as the Pashtun "manifest destiny".

And so as the 'warlords' in the Pashtun areas ultimately were removed or joined the Taliban, the regional and ethnic leaders elsewhere remained the only hope of the non-Pashtun peoples facing Taliban occupation and domination. In the aftermath of the Taliban and the civil war, these regions are extremely mistrustful of any campaign to centralize because it has always amounted to ethnic domination.

If the repressive measures of successive Afghan leaders, the Soviet occupation and the later Taliban regime were unable to create a viable strong central State and stamp out this diversity, it is highly unlikely that the Kabul administration, with the help of the international community, is going to succeed in doing so now.

This attempt is not just highly unrealistic: it aims at a morally problematic goal. Undermining the regions by weakening their self-defense, by attacking their legitimacy and by labeling their leaders 'warlords' has hardly endeared the populations outside Kabul to the current administration. Centralization has been an historical tool of repression. Asking regions to support a strong centralized state is tantamount to asking for the end of cultural, religious and ethnic autonomy with only a promise that rights will be respected. And given the historical context not just of the Taliban years, but the past century, it is no wonder that so many Afghans are unwilling to surrender their hard-won freedom.

The Afghan government's top priority should have been measures that build community trust and reduce the highly polarized issue of ethnicity. Perversely, the government's attempts to prohibit any mention of ethnicity and its insistence on exercising complete control over the regions has weakened its authority overall. The regions, for their part, are increasingly focused on the thinly disguised specter of yet another crudely-made, centralizing experiment.

The Persistence of Extremism and the Decentralized Solution

But centralization has another dimension in Afghanistan as well, for the strongest antagonism to a decentralized State comes from the Taliban extremists and their ethnic and religious supporters as well as other fundamentalists. Beyond a relatively small but internationally well-connected group of former exiles that benefited from Afghan central governments of yesteryear, it is the ethnic nationalists and religious extremists who argue

¹² Among other reports, see those published by Human Rights Watch, Vol. 10 No. 7 (c), 1998 and Vol. 13 No. 1 (c), 2001

vociferously for strong and dominant central authority. They firmly believe that diversity undermines the idea of Afghanistan as a Pashtun country or an extremist Islamic one. Diversity is a condition that for them is both dangerous and intolerable.

It should not be assumed, however, that the fusion of ethnic and religious fundamentalism is only to be found in Pashtun communities. Certain other ethnic groups have had equally strong ambitions to dominate the other communities through control of the center, and while less successful, were in practice no less destructive of the Afghan nation. For example, of the two Tajik run administrations, one fell within a year or so, and the other lasted effectively less than five years.¹³ No doubt there was strenuous contest by the Pashtuns, but what is remarkable is that the Tajik administrations managed to alienate the non-Tajiks so thoroughly as well.¹⁴

Rather, it is that the Pashtun regions produced the most successful political movement in the form of the Taliban, before tactically retreating under pressure of American airpower and significant local resistance. But what animates all such extremists is the notion that they have a right to dominate absolutely, that co-existence is a repudiation of their higher claims, and that their interests alone are fused with those of the Afghan State. And the fastest and most powerful method of domination over the country has been through the capital. In the zero-sum environment of Afghan minority relations, he who controls the center controls the country.

This is the crux of the matter for the United States. Instead of diminishing the importance of Kabul, the U.S. and the Karzai administration has supported the very policy that motivates the extremists to regroup and to contest the current administration.

Hence the difficulty that the south and eastern areas present for the current Afghan administration. While Karzai's strategy of provoking non-Pashtun regions may be an attempt to shore up support in his Pashtun base, he has not only failed to diminish the Taliban but has strengthened them. These ethnic and religious extremists are particularly dangerous for President Karzai, who hails from a prominent Kandahari, Pashtun family with deep roots in the area. If he is unable to maintain any authority whatsoever in the region, what other pro-American, moderate Pashtun will be able to?

Extremism persists in Afghanistan as a universalist and absolutist way of thinking, and it requires a centralized condition so that it can expand and enforce its vision. Rather than recognize this, the U.S. has been pulled into mythical and romantic notions of a unified Afghanistan whose ultimate goal is to perpetuate the politics of domination through the center.

¹³ These were Bacha-i-Saqao in 1929, and Professor Rabbani, effectively President from mid 1992 until the Taliban takeover of Kabul in the fall of 1996.

¹⁴ And so today, each group continues to attempt control over the others through the means available. For example, General Fahim, the Tajik defense minister in Karzai's administration, initially appointed only Tajiks generals to the national army (and one Uzbek), although he subsequently broadened the appointments after sufficient pressure was applied.

What Works – What Doesn't

The U.S. military initially defeated al-Qaeda and the Taliban by using the regional dynamics that are anathema to the administration in Kabul as well as the fundamentalists. It was the defeat of the Taliban in Mazar-i Sharif in November 2001 that caused the rest of the country – including the south and east – to collapse rapidly, because the extremist regime was now denied non-Pashtun lands that had justified their brutal rule.

But the valuable lesson was lost on subsequent U.S. policy. Having undermined a Pashtun-dominated Afghanistan by its military campaign, it then minimized the importance of identity and rebuilt the very centralized condition that the extremists require. This policy of over-emphasizing the administration in Kabul has, ironically, weakened the Afghan state. Given the rampant ethnic mistrust, and the impatience with yet more social experiments, any attempt to push yet again for a centralized State is precisely what may cause the breakup of Afghanistan. No community has called for secession, but Afghanistan has lost more than one generation to this social and political experiment. There are few left who are willing to tolerate another round of such efforts.

The Way Ahead: Policy Prescriptions

The U.S. approach towards a strong centralized state should be abandoned in favor of a more decentralized approach. The Karzai administration in Kabul must remain a focus for the U.S. but there is an urgent need to establish a system that takes into consideration the needs and leadership of all the regions. If the U.S. persists in working only through Kabul, its objectives for a truly representative, moderate national government will fail to materialize and the precarious state of ethnic relations will deteriorate further.

The fractured relations and history of violence between communities demands that a greater political space be created in Afghanistan. A two-track political development of both a national government in Kabul and regional power centers within a loosely federated or confederated system would create that space. While there is serious opposition to such a 'regional', 'cantonal' or 'zonal' approach by those charged with drawing up a new constitution, and indeed by many in Kabul who are threatened by the loss of absolute political power in such an arrangement, regional political organization has been a *de facto* reality for many years now. If regions reflect Afghanistan's cultural, ethnic and religious divisions in the country, regional organizations have provided local conflict mediation, economic activity and political resistance to some of the worst abuses of political misrule.¹⁵

¹⁵ The regions already have some basis in recognition from outside actors as well. For example, the United Nations have managed their programmes through 'regional' offices, and similarly, the U.S. military also organized the resistance to the Taliban through regional blocks. However Karzai has recently dismantled

In short, building on this existing regional approach would be more inclusive and reduce the insecurity associated with a ‘winner take all’ status quo. A decentralized system not only is more realistic, given facts on the ground, but would over time provide the only way to a functional, unified and independent Afghan nation because it would directly reduce the concerns underpinning inter-ethnic conflict. A policy to achieve this must work at varying speeds with the different regions. Some will move faster, while others will be more difficult, requiring greater military efforts. But ignoring the complexity of Afghanistan to pursue unrealistic goals about centralized state-building will do more damage not just to those communities, but to the Afghan nation.

Not least, a final argument in favor of a loosely federated or confederated system is that it is the only approach in which the ideas underpinning ethnic and religious extremism are directly repudiated. Decentralization challenges the dogma of domination with a more tolerant and moderate political order. The war on terrorism in Afghanistan has as much a battle over ideology as it is a battle over land. Cultural, ethnic and religious notions are interrelated in complex ways that sustain the extremist movements, so it is here – at the structure of domination – that the battle must be engaged.

Under this new U.S. policy, the international requirements of the state, and the minimum domestic obligations would continue to be controlled by Kabul. However, the remaining areas, including reconstruction and policing, would devolve to those regions directly. While this is the most effective, and least divisive way to approach reconstruction and security, it will also help to reduce the inflated expectations of some Afghans that a centralized, modern Afghanistan will somehow be spontaneously created through the reconstruction process.

In pursuing this balanced approach, the U.S. should focus on encouraging cooperation, trust and goodwill between the regions and the center in Kabul. Among other things, this means understanding the highly politicized claims and counter-claims of ethnic violence or abuses perpetuated by the “other side” and resisting the tendency to use these to promote one group over another. Given the scale of abuses that have been perpetuated by all sides, human rights education should be promoted as an effective way of going forward to improve community confidence and enhance regional stability.

The logjam of resources at the center must be broken. The administration in Kabul must be reminded that resources are two-way street, and the U.S. should provide direct assistance to those regions that make progress towards disarmament, reform and reconstruction.¹⁶

the regional military structures, particularly the ones in the north and the west that helped rout the Taliban and al-Qaeda.

¹⁶ While USAID, the UN and others, the current Afghan administration has begun important reconstruction work in the field of education, health and the repair of some of the necessary infrastructure of the capital, the reconstruction of the regions has largely gone unaddressed. The majority of the funds allocated have gone to Kabul: of approximately 170 quick impact projects listed by USAID since January 2002, well over half have gone to building central government capacity or to Kabul directly. Another 10% has gone to

In the immediate term, the U.S. needs to:

- Slow down the constitutional process and make it provisional in order to allow a federalist or confederalist process to be developed. The whole constitutional process is increasingly problematic because of the complete lack of public debate about either the constitution or the *Loya Jirga* delegate selection. Even so, there is much to be salvaged but it means working with the administrative infrastructure at the district level in order to create a more participatory local government.
- Instill a sense of realism about the time it will take to establish a functioning government in Afghanistan. This is a matter of decades, not a couple of years. All participants need to maintain a perspective on the ability to impose lasting and significant change through external or top-down procedures. To the extent that significant changes must be undertaken, as far as possible they should be incremental in speed and initiated at the grass roots.
- Work with regional administrations that support the U.S. anti-terrorist and anti-narcotics interests. These administrations are working well in certain parts of the country and therefore are the most efficient structures to build on.
- Regional problem solving should not be undermined in favor of some idealized central approach that will not work and will only contribute to stagnation and antagonism with the administration in Kabul.
- Establish U.S. consular offices in seven regions in addition to the embassy in Kabul. They would be given more authority and autonomy to initiate reconstruction projects, such as roads, schools, clinics and other relief efforts. USAID presence and assistance should be accelerated in the regions immediately. Among other goals AID should be focused on building inter- and intra- community trust, and not just high-profile state building projects.
- Expand U.S. military civil affairs teams in the regions, and provide them with more resources to work on reconstruction projects. Cultivate a strategic perspective on the security implications of road-building and other forms of assistance
- Reestablish recently dismantled cooperative Afghan regional or zonal structures, which were so successful at helping the U.S. campaign, and as a backstop against growing al-Qaeda and Taliban activities.
- Encourage the participation of the regional business communities in local decisions, and bring them into partnership in reconstruction projects. The U.S. is on the right track to move away from a sole concentration on NGO delivery, but should include using local

other Pashtun provinces. However under-targeted these provinces are, certain others have seen almost no USAID benefits whatsoever. Material taken from *USAID Monthly Field Reports online*.

Afghan business capacity where it exists. Take advantage of OPIC's willingness to build on its work in Afghanistan by being open to worthwhile projects outside Kabul.

- Promote capacity building for most local governments, including administration infrastructure, human rights training and other assistance. Encourage the institutes within the National Endowment for Democracy to become active in political development at the regional level.

Over the long-term, the U.S. should maintain support for:

- Reformation of the judiciary at the regional and district level to improve the quality of local courts, with the recognition that the reforms will require longer time frames than is generally realized.
- Training of the local police and military units at the district and regional levels. Training of the national army should take place not just in Kabul but also at the regional level with regional leader participation, and again, will take longer than currently anticipated. Historically, national armies have sometimes been taken for armies of occupation, so establishing secure limits on the function of a national army is critical.
- Cooperation between different communities at the regional level and the inter-regional level. More diverse authority at various levels is needed. A significantly longer time frame set out by the Bonn Accords is needed and will require improving regional security structures to support these efforts.

Finally, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have grown in an environment that provokes old chauvinisms and long-standing divisions. U.S. policy must adjust to a more complex situation than the authors of the Bonn agreement anticipated. The different regions of Afghanistan are at different stages in and perspectives on their past and future. Some of these regions have been constructive and some not. Yet the differences have been ignored in order to preserve outmoded political notions. This does not necessarily portend the end of Afghanistan, but U.S. policy must be adjusted to help the country survive, and eventually thrive.