



## Post-Election Strategy in Afghanistan

By Vance Serchuk

*On September 18, 2005, Afghanistan held its first democratic parliamentary and provincial elections in more than thirty-five years. The vote marks the successful completion of the transitional political process outlined by the 2001 Bonn Accords, the internationally brokered framework that has guided Afghanistan since the ouster of the Taliban. The United States and its allies in Kabul can rightly celebrate the passage of this milestone and the remarkable progress that has been achieved over the past four years. At the same time, the end of Bonn is also a natural time to raise questions about the Bush administration's long-term road map for Afghanistan. Two problems with the current American strategy—too much faith in NATO and too little investment in indigenous Afghan institutions—deserve particular attention.*

Afghans voted on September 18 in parliamentary and provincial elections—an event that passed so calmly and peacefully that it seems to have barely registered on the American consciousness, much less that of preoccupied policymakers in Washington, D.C. The vote was preceded by a summer of heightened violence, as Islamist insurgents mounted attacks on U.S. soldiers and Afghan civilians alike, causing the worst casualties since 2001. Despite these efforts, however, the Taliban and its ideological allies failed in their attempt to derail the country's political process.

Likewise, while it was fashionable just a few months ago to predict that Afghanistan's warlords would disrupt or steal the vote, this too appears to have largely proven a phantom menace. While instances of fraud are being uncovered, the extent of the irregularities appears to be relatively localized.<sup>1</sup> The European Union's observer mission, meanwhile, has praised the election for its "commendable openness to election stakeholders" and its "wide choice of political contestants."<sup>2</sup> If nothing else, the countrywide

coordination evident on September 18 should put to rest the shopworn cliché—already heard less and less frequently—that Hamid Karzai is just the "mayor of Kabul."<sup>3</sup>

Last month's balloting also marked the formal completion of the political transition outlined by the Bonn Accords in December 2001. Although still institutionally fragile and heavily dependent on the military and financial support of the United States, Afghanistan can no longer be considered a "failed" state, much less a "rogue" one.

It is strange to contrast the scenes of this fall's elections to the very different images of Afghanistan that confronted Americans four years ago: a country ruled by the most extreme Islamist regime on the planet, which banned television, music, and kite-flying, radically circumscribed the rights of women, and provided safe haven to terrorist groups from more than two dozen countries. Afghanistan, then, was also a country plagued by an unremitting, brutal civil war, responsible for the deaths of more than a million people, with no conceivable end in sight.

The U.S.-led invasion radically altered this balance of power, not only routing the Taliban, but also foreclosing the possibility of large-scale conventional warfare for the foreseeable

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future. While September 11, 2001, remains for Americans the start of what is likely to be a long war, the attacks effectively marked the end of one in Afghanistan.

Even after the Taliban retreated from Kandahar on December 7, 2001, however, the notion that Afghanistan would prove fertile ground for peaceful, competitive, democratic elections struck many as quixotic, if not outright delusional. The Bonn Accords, one might recall, did not exactly establish an encouraging model of governance. To the contrary, the agreement provided a patina of international legitimacy to the Northern Alliance's on-the-ground seizure of power in Kabul. While Hamid Karzai was named president as a sop to the Pashtun majority, the sweet-shop power ministries—Defense, Interior, Foreign—remained in the hands of a clique of Panshiri Tajiks.<sup>4</sup> Even as the United States began building a new Afghan National Army in early 2002, the initial force was very much ethnically and politically dominated by the old guard of the Northern Alliance.

This moment, too, has thankfully passed. The Afghan National Army is today emerging as a multiethnic, capable force, loyal to the central government in Kabul rather than any particular faction, while control of the power ministries—and indeed, power itself—has been dispersed among a more balanced and representative set of actors. Thanks to the agile maneuvering of President Karzai and former U.S. ambassador to Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad, some of the most notorious warlords like Rashid Dostum and Ismail Khan have been maneuvered out of their old regional power bases, diminishing their influence.

To acknowledge the reality of progress in Afghanistan should not be taken as an encomium to the Bush administration and its management of the postwar transition, however. In fact, when a proper history of America's Afghan policy is written, it will—to the disappointment of partisan hacks on left and right alike—expose the extent to which much about the country's trajectory since 2001 has been heavily shaped by dynamics and developments internal to Afghanistan itself. To the extent anyone can claim credit for Afghanistan's success, furthermore, it lies foremost with a handful of farsighted American strategists, like Ambassador Khalilzad, who developed and implemented policy in Kabul with minimal interference from Washington.

Consequently, the completion of the recent elections and the Bonn process should not provide an opening

for any "Mission Accomplished" strutting. To the contrary, there remains a tremendous need for a rigorous examination of the Bush administration's long-term strategy in Afghanistan.

It is especially unfortunate that coverage of Afghanistan over the past few months has focused almost exclusively on the elections and the steady stream of attacks that preceded them. In the emphasis on these headline-grabbing events, many of the considerably more vexing, long-term challenges facing the United States in Afghanistan have gone overlooked. Rather than obsessing over the ebbs and flows of the insurgency or the annual poppy crop, policymakers would do better to examine two weaknesses in current U.S. policy: overconfidence in NATO and other instruments of the "international community," and underinvestment in indigenous Afghan institutions.

## NATO's Role in Afghanistan

For three years, it has been an entrenched, if not especially well-rationalized, conviction across the political spectrum that NATO should be doing "more" in Afghanistan. Congressman Tom Lantos (D-Calif.) expressed this conventional wisdom at a recent hearing of the House International Relations Committee: "I must say . . . that a large group of wealthy European countries with vast military forces, which have been protected overwhelmingly by the United States for two generations should be able to mount a more effective presence in Afghanistan. It seems incomprehensible to a rational human being that France, that Germany and Italy and the Low Countries and the Scandinavians and others, the new NATO members, together, cannot mount a significant NATO presence in Afghanistan."<sup>5</sup>

Contrary to its supposedly unilateralist tendencies, the Bush administration has repeatedly echoed this complaint, successfully pushing the Atlantic alliance to assume a greater share of the burden in Afghanistan. NATO has twice expanded its area of operations since taking command of the UN-sanctioned International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in August 2003: first moving from Kabul into the relatively stable north in late 2003, then expanding into western Afghanistan this past June.

Looking ahead, the Bush administration is calling on NATO to do still more in Afghanistan. Next year, for instance, the alliance is scheduled to take responsibility for the volatile south, where the Taliban insurgency is

still strong. At a recent NATO defense ministerial in Berlin, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld argued that the alliance must also ultimately be prepared to move into eastern Afghanistan, and that it should develop capabilities not only for peacekeeping in Afghanistan, but for “counterterrorism” as well.<sup>6</sup>

To accommodate its growing mandate, the Bush administration is pushing NATO to overhaul its command structure in Afghanistan. Under one proposed scheme, the overall ISAF commander would have two deputies: one responsible for peacekeeping and reconstruction, and the other in charge of counterinsurgency operations. Although encountering resistance from European countries, this internal bifurcation of ISAF would allow casualty-averse states like Germany to continue

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operating in the north, while more stalwart allies like Britain could take charge in the south.

It also appears the Bush administration is considering involving NATO in the development of the Afghan army and police. The new U.S. ambassador to NATO, Victoria Nuland, suggested in a recent speech that the alliance should transform itself into the world’s “multilateral security trainer of first resort.” Afghanistan, of course, would present an attractive test bed for this new assignment.

On paper, all of this sounds extremely impressive and attractive. What’s not to like, after all, about shaming Europeans into doing their fair share in Afghanistan?

In practice, however, saddling NATO with ever more responsibilities in Afghanistan risks becoming a largely self-referential exercise. Afghanistan may present the Pentagon with a convenient tool for bludgeoning defense reform out of Brussels, but the Bush administration should remember that the top prize here is not a “transformed” NATO. It is victory in Afghanistan. To the extent the former goal can be yoked to the latter, that is certainly

commendable. But there are disturbing indications that the calculus may be working the other way around.

Is NATO really capable of assuming control over southern Afghanistan? NATO’s leaders in Brussels promise it will be, insisting they understand that this will be a make-or-break mission for the alliance. What is less clear, however, is the extent to which this commitment is shared by some of the national governments inside the coalition. Given NATO’s perennial problems with national caveats—wherein governments forbid their forces from being used for certain kinds of operations, such as riot control or drug interdiction—and the sensitivities of certain member states about casualties, there are good reasons for skepticism. As Assistant Secretary of Defense Peter W. Rodman put it at a hearing last month: “We have a concern about the national caveat by which some countries are very reluctant to take any risks . . . They don’t go to the latrine without a vote from their parliament. This is not helping.”<sup>7</sup>

Even with a bifurcated command structure, NATO member states have yet to develop an internal consensus about their strategy and mission in Afghanistan, much less a common understanding of controversial concepts of operation like “counterinsurgency” and “counter-narcotics.” The Canadians, for instance, have already taken command of a Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) in Kandahar and declared that they will be drawing a strict line in its future operations between “security,” which their military will provide, and “reconstruction,” which their aid agency will oversee. This is precisely the bureaucratic distinction that the U.S. mission and the entire PRT concept have labored to erase—but which the Canadians, apparently for ideological reasons, are determined to reassert.<sup>8</sup>

Posing tough questions about NATO’s plans and capabilities in Afghanistan should not be construed as gratuitous Euro-bashing or an endorsement of American unilateralism. The presence of NATO troops has of course been extremely beneficial, as have military contributions by other allies, including South Korea and New Zealand. U.S. military officials in Kabul have nothing but praise for French Special Forces deployed near the Pakistani border, and the likely addition of some 4,000 British troops to southern Afghanistan next year, as part of NATO’s expansion there, is welcome.

Rather, the warning here is primarily for the Bush administration, which out of its own reluctance to become too deeply enmeshed in postwar Afghanistan has repeatedly deferred critical tasks to allies who could

not realistically be expected to accomplish them. The disastrous lack of reform of the Afghan National Police, for instance, is at least partially attributable to a decision in early 2002 to fob this vital assignment off on Germany, which accepted and then botched the job. It is a profoundly cautionary tale for those in Brussels eager to entrust NATO with other aspects of security sector reform.

NATO's role in Afghanistan should be guided by realism about what the alliance can and cannot be reasonably expected to accomplish, rather than by the Pentagon's desire to compel reform in Brussels or to slough off responsibilities to the Europeans.

It makes matters even worse when the Bush administration fosters the impression that it considers NATO expansion to be the key to its own exit strategy from the Hindu Kush. The same day that Secretary Rumsfeld argued for the alliance to be prepared to wage counter-insurgency in Afghanistan, for instance, planners at U.S. Central Command announced that they were contemplating a 20 percent cut in American force levels in Afghanistan next spring. "It makes sense that as NATO forces go in, and they're more in numbers, that we could drop some of the U.S. requirements somewhat," said General John P. Abizaid, commander of U.S. Central Command.<sup>9</sup>

Although the new U.S. ambassador in Kabul, Ronald Neumann, has hastened to address Afghan fears about a diminishing American commitment to their country, his choice of words—"As part of NATO, we will continue to play our active role"—left a good deal to be desired.<sup>10</sup> President Bush might want to remind his lieutenants that it was he, not NATO, who signed a strategic partnership with President Karzai back in May.

## **Nation-Building without Institution-Building**

The Bush administration's blind faith in an expanded NATO presence is symptomatic of a broader problem in its Afghan strategy. Across the board, the United States is relying too much on the instruments of the "international community" to transform Afghanistan—European peacekeepers for security, transnational NGOs for reconstruction, etc.—rather than directly cultivating and developing indigenous Afghan institutions.

The recent elections are a case in point. The U.S. military prepared meticulously for September 18, coordinating security with the Afghan army and police at thousands of polling sites. But while considerable effort

was spent on carrying off the elections as an "event," there has been comparatively little direct investment in the democratic bodies that are actually being formed by it. It is symbolically appropriate that the groundbreaking ceremony for the new parliament building in Kabul took place only during the last week of August. Quite literally, we are endorsing the creation of institutions without bothering to lay their foundations.<sup>11</sup>

This is ironic, since it is precisely these institutions that will shape the political and economic progress that U.S. strategists are banking on against the insurgency. How, for instance, will the election of hundreds of newly minted political actors affect the balance of power in Afghanistan? Much has been made of the election of warlords, narco-traffickers, and other riffraff to the national assembly. In fact, having potential spoilers buy into the system—bribing, rather than shooting, their way to power—is preferable to the alternative. More worrisome is how Afghanistan's myriad ideological and ethnic divisions could play out in the national and provincial assemblies. As the Bush administration has learned in Iraq, parliamentarians can just as easily be a force for dividing, rather than unifying, a nation.

In other areas as well, the United States needs to be focusing its resources toward bolstering the quotidian workings of Afghan governance. The current U.S. strategy relies heavily on dispensing vast sums of money to NGOs and commercial contractors, who, with their large salaries, vacuum up the best local talent and take over key functions that are more properly the preserve of the state. Rather than indirectly undermining Afghan governance, the United States should be searching for innovative ways to provide focused, long-term technical and fiscal assistance to its key nodal points, such as police, courts, and the civil bureaucracy.

This prescription is hardly revolutionary. The U.S. military recognized nearly two years ago that the development of a functional Afghan army would depend on its sustained, comprehensive nurturing—with embedded trainers and mentors, a massive web of logistical support, and delicate diplomacy. For all the talk of an "imperial" foreign policy, the failure to cultivate new indigenous elites through aggressive institution-building in areas outside the Afghan military shows just how poorly the Bush administration grasps the nature of empire.

The U.S. enterprise in Afghanistan will live or die by its success at institution-building, affecting every other aspect of the mission—from drugs to terrorism to

democracy itself. Elections are of course an incredibly powerful force—establishing popular legitimacy for the exercise of power, forging a closer bond between those who govern and those who are governed, allowing the “quiet majority” of Afghans to demonstrate, to themselves as much as to the world, just how small the extremist fringe actually is—but we also cannot be so complacent as to assume that the act of voting alone will raise living standards or establish a sense of civic inclusion.

The sad truth is that there are plenty of discouraging examples of countries with democratic frameworks and weak institutional cores, such as Russia, the Philippines, and Nigeria. As political theorist Stephen Holmes wrote nearly a decade ago, “Russian elections do not produce anything even vaguely resembling accountable or responsive government largely because of institutional weakness. . . . Elections in Russia, in fact, do not create power. For the most part, they mirror the power that already exists. Incumbents find their supporters in hidden networks.” He added: “Liberal values are threatened just as thoroughly by state incapacity as by despotic power.”<sup>12</sup>

Such is the perfect epigram for present day Afghanistan as well.

## U.S.-Afghan Partnership

On May 23 at the White House, Presidents Bush and Karzai signed the *Joint Declaration of the United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership*. While overshadowed at the time by reports of detainee abuses in Afghanistan and a leaked State Department cable peevishly criticizing Kabul for its efforts on drug eradication, the text of the joint declaration contained more than just the typical diplomatic pabulum.

Under the headings of “democracy and governance,” “prosperity,” and “security,” the partnership enumerated eighteen concrete points on which Washington and Kabul agreed to work together—some quite bold and provocative. These include pledges to:

Encourage the advancement of freedom and democracy in the wider region.

Facilitate and support Afghanistan’s integration into regional and world economies and appropriate international organizations.

Help develop a legal and institutional framework for a thriving private sector and an envi-

ronment favorable to international investment in Afghanistan.

Encourage and facilitate involvement of U.S. businesses in ventures that accelerate the development of Afghan firms and the private sector.

Strengthen Afghanistan’s ties with NATO.<sup>13</sup>

With the completion of the Bonn process, the Bush administration need look no further than the strategic partnership for its post-elections Afghan roadmap. To date, however, there is little evidence that the ambitious program put forward back in May is being pushed forward at any level of government. At a recent House hearing on U.S. policy in Afghanistan, the partnership was mentioned only as a brief talking point in the prepared testimony of Ambassador Maureen Quinn, the State Department’s Afghanistan coordinator. There was no indication—beyond the fact of its existence—as to whether there has been any organized, institutional follow-through on its various pledges.

This failure to translate grand strategy into on-the-ground results is by now a familiar one in the Bush administration’s foreign policy. It is nonetheless bizarre to see a Muslim country in the heart of the greater Middle East—desirous of a long-term strategic partnership with the United States, eager to transform the nature of its politics and economy—getting the cold shoulder from Washington.

Granted, more than four years after September 11, the U.S. government remains utterly unorganized to provide the kind of help that Afghanistan so desperately needs. As American commanders in Afghanistan can attest, there really is not much institutional capacity in the U.S. bureaucracy to reform an Afghan police force or professionalize the judiciary or build a civil service, other than farming these missions out to NGOs and private contractors. Nonetheless, these are precisely the kinds of crucial tasks that the United States must accomplish in Afghanistan—not to mention elsewhere in the Middle East.

Toppling tyrants, or at least pressuring them to liberalize, is a fine beginning to the global war on terror. But what happens if we are granted our wish, and genuinely democratic, albeit weak, governments begin to take root in the region? If the present U.S. experience in Afghanistan is any indication, the U.S. government remains a long way from having a good answer to that

question—if indeed it has even begun to ask it at all.

## Notes

1. Carlotta Gall, “Monitors Find Significant Fraud in Afghan Elections,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2005.
2. Golnaz Esfandiari and Ron Synovitz, “Officials Praise Elections Despite Lower-Than-Expected Turnout,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Afghanistan Report* 4, no. 26 (September 26, 2005).
3. See Seymour M. Hersh, “The Other War: Why Bush’s Afghanistan Problem Won’t Go Away,” *The New Yorker*, April 12, 2004. Richard A. Clarke, former counterterrorism adviser on the National Security Council, says, “The U.S. has succeeded in stabilizing only two or three cities. The President of Afghanistan is just the mayor of Kabul.”
4. See S. Frederick Starr and Marin J. Strmecki, “Afghan Democracy and Its First Missteps,” *New York Times*, June 14, 2002.
5. U.S. Representative Tom Lantos, speaking on U.S. policy in Afghanistan, on September 22, 2005, to the House International Relations Committee.
6. Demetri Sevastopulo and Peter Spiegel, “NATO Must Combat Afghan Terrorists, Urges Rumsfeld,” *Financial Times*, September 14, 2005.
7. Peter W. Rodman, speaking on U.S. policy in Afghanistan, on September 22, 2005, to the House International Relations Committee.
8. Terry Pedwell, “Canadians in Kandahar Take Different Approach to Aid than U.S. Counterparts,” *Canadian Press*, August 11, 2005.
9. Eric Schmitt and David S. Cloud, “U.S. May Start Pulling Out of Afghanistan Next Spring,” *New York Times*, September 14, 2005.
10. “U.S. Emphasizes Military Presence in Afghanistan,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newline for Southwestern Asia and the Middle East* 9, no. 178 (September 20, 2005).
11. Indo-Asian News Service, “Afghan Parliament Building with Indian Help,” August 29, 2005.
12. Stephen Holmes, “What Russia Teaches Us Now,” *The American Prospect*, July–August 1997.
13. *Joint Declaration of the United States-Afghanistan Strategic Partnership*, Office of the Press Secretary, the White House, May 23, 2005, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2005/05/20050523-2.html>.