



BETWEEN PERFECTION AND PERDITION: STRATEGIES FOR A SUSTAINABLE OUTCOME IN AFGHANISTAN

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The progress of the international peacebuilding effort in Afghanistan remains uncertain. On one hand, attempts to reconstitute an Afghan government after the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001 were largely successful, leading to the election of a popular president and parliament, and important progress was made in improving development indicators in much of the country. On the other hand, the intervening period has also witnessed the resurgence of the Taliban movement based in the borderlands of Pakistan, a rising number of guerrilla and terrorist attacks within Afghanistan, growth in the illicit opium economy, continued weakness and corruption in important segments of the Afghan state including the Afghan National Police, declining public support for the national government and the international presence, and persistent reports of poor coordination among the various international actors in Afghanistan. This apparent backsliding has led many observers to call for a rethinking of the international strategy in Afghanistan, including its goals, methods and timelines.

What are the key elements of a realistic strategy? What would it take to set Afghanistan on the path towards a stable, sustainable peace? Some observers criticize the under-commitment of international military and aid resources to the mission and are calling for a major increase in the number of international forces and financial assistance to Afghanistan. Others argue that problems stem more from a lack of strategic vision for the mission, or poor implementation of the existing strategy, than the level of resources. Still others contend that the international presence has been too intrusive and is, itself, undermining the capacity of the Afghan state to become more effective and strengthen its legitimacy within Afghan society.

As this debate goes on, three things seem clear:

- First, there is a need for a clearer and more limited set of priorities for the international effort in Afghanistan. Hopes of reconstructing the Afghan state and society – transforming it into a thriving market democracy – are unrealistic not only because of the scale of the development challenges and the deeply rooted nature of Afghanistan's tribal politics and informal economic structures, but also because there is little prospect of massive increase in international military or development aid. Whatever is to be accomplished in Afghanistan, therefore, must be based on a realistic identification of priority goals, which will in turn require a difficult but necessary exercise to identify less important objectives. The current modus operandi of donors is to identify everything as a priority. What has become clear from this strategy since 2001 is that when

everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. Better sequencing of policies and objectives is needed.

- Second, abandoning Afghanistan is not a realistic option either. A return of chaos and civil war to the country would likely have grave repercussions for regional and international security and, of course, for the Afghan people themselves.
- Third, whatever strategy is pursued, it should be based on the assumption that achieving even modest peacebuilding objectives in Afghanistan will take many years, if not decades – and that planning must extend long beyond the termination of the current Afghanistan Compact. It should also identify milestones or benchmarks for progress over time, recognizing that the mission itself will need to change as circumstances evolve. Indeed, the long-term international involvement in Afghanistan should be conceived as a series of “successive missions” that reflect the long-term nature of the enterprise and its evolving priorities over time.

Put differently, there is a need to articulate clearer strategies for sustainable peace in Afghanistan, starting from the premise that “perfection” is not achievable and “perdition” is not acceptable.

The sponsors of this research project – the Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS) at the University of Ottawa, the Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) in Waterloo, Canada and the Center for 21st Century Global Governance at University of Denver – have invited several of the leading analysts to provide a detailed answer to a deceptively simple question: **What is the best strategy for achieving a sustainable outcome in Afghanistan?**

Each analyst has been asked to write a 30-page essay setting out:

- their detailed vision of a sustainable outcome in Afghanistan based on a realistic assessment of opportunities and constraints;
- the most important priorities for achieving this outcome and how they should be sequenced;
- the principal obstacles to achieving this outcome, and how they should be addressed and overcome;
- the timeline for achieving a sustainable outcome, including the key milestones; and
- the different types of international involvement (“successive missions”) that would be required as conditions evolve and as milestones are met or not met.

In short, the analysts will be asked to define an overarching strategy for the international peacebuilding effort in Afghanistan.

The writers will present their draft essays at a **workshop in Ottawa on January 20, 2009**. Other analysts and policy professionals with expertise on Afghanistan will be invited to the workshop to comment on the papers and participate in the discussion. Due to limited space, attendance at the workshop will be **by invitation only**. Discussion will be subject to the Chatham House Rule (no remarks made at the meeting may be attributed to participants).

Following the workshop, the authors will revise their papers for publication. A brief summary of the workshop discussions will also be produced and disseminated by CIPS and CIGI.

PAPER WRITERS

- **Gilles Dorransoro**, Professor of Political Science at the Institut d'études politiques in Rennes, France, and Researcher at the Centre d'études et de recherches internationales in Paris
- **Ali Jalali**, Distinguished Professor, Near East South Asia Center for Strategic Studies, National Defense University, and former Interior Minister of Afghanistan
- **Ronald Neumann**, Adjunct Professor, Elliot School of International Affairs, George Washington University, and former United States Ambassador to Afghanistan
- **Sima Samar**, Chairperson, Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, Kabul
- **Nazif Shahrani**, Professor of Anthropology and Central Asian & Middle Eastern Studies, Indiana University
- **Rory Stewart**, Author, former British military and foreign service officer, and Chief Executive of the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, Kabul
- **Seddiq Weera**, Senior Advisor, Independent National Commission on Strengthening Peace, Afghanistan, and Senior Policy Advisor, Minister of Education, Afghanistan

PROJECT CO-CHAIRS

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SUSTAINABLE PEACEBUILDING NETWORK

This project is part of a larger Sustainable Peacebuilding Network jointly organized by the University of Ottawa and the University of Denver with the support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The purpose of the network is to examine the challenges of achieving more sustainable outcomes in peacebuilding operations, based on the observation that most missions to date have been designed with insufficiently long time horizons and without sufficient focus on longer-term requirements for “locking in” early successes. Other projects within this initiative will examine the role of specific peacebuilding actors – the United Nations Peacebuilding Commission, NATO, and the Special Representatives of the Secretary-General, and “pivotal states” who play a leading role in specific operations – as well as other ongoing or recent peacebuilding missions including those in the Horn of Africa. For further information on the Sustainable Peacebuilding Initiative, please see www.statebuilding.org.