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Afghanistan and Peace-Building: Where to After Ashdown?

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Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai's refusal to accept Paddy Ashdown as the United Nation's 'super envoy' raises questions about the future of that mission, and more generally the difficulty of post-conflict peace-building.

SINCE 1989 the UN Security Council has authorised a succession of international interventions to monitor, stabilise and, where possible, conclude violence between and within states. Since then there have been more than 60 such UN missions and a further 30 organised by regional coalitions or individual states, growing steadily in cost, muscularity and degree of intrusion over the period.

The Challenges of Contemporary Peace-Building

There is now much focus on the post-conflict aspect of peace-keeping, namely peace-building – definable as efforts at capacity-building, reconciliation and social transformation to address the causes of conflict and to strengthen political settlements. Peace-building has today assumed a prominent part of the UN's work, which has established a dedicated Commission, Fund and Support Office. It has drawn donors into new areas requiring new policy skills from disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR) to security sector reform (SSR). But greater capability, money and focus has not brought greater success.

While there is broad consensus that multilateral means to restoring order, establishing institutions of governance and encouraging prosperity are preferable to unilateral approaches, increasingly it is the diffused character of interventions that spawn some of the thorniest peace-building problems. Managing the 'swarm' of governmental, bilateral and multilateral, and non-governmental military and civilian agencies is difficult, especially where the host government is weak and these external bodies have different interests, aims and operating caveats and procedures.

All this must occur amidst general difficulties associated in building nations and states. It is not

enough to simply remove a regime, replace it with another and leave. This challenge is amplified by sensitivities that make the perception of rule by foreigners politically untenable, even though a successful mission demands that they are *in situ* for a lengthy period. While Western politics demands that local partners adhere to governance standards that the interveners can be proud of, often this is a politico-cultural anathema and bureaucratically alien to the host state.

Is it questionable whether it is possible to win hearts and minds in a culturally foreign environment, especially in an Islamic society where the devotion to state and religion are not necessarily one, a situation complicated, too, by an overlay of tribal loyalties. Such issues are exacerbated by the existence of an asymmetric military situation, where the opponent is willing to risk much more and be more patient than the foreign interveners.

Economic growth, rule of law, and political inclusiveness are essential tenets of such missions to prevent a return to civil war. They require the local partner government to take responsibility – hence the need for peace-building operations to focus on building key state institutions. But this is not always easy where the host states are fragmented and where their (in)capacity can reflect a need for political balance and compromise.

Such missions also demand economy of effort, focus of force and coherence of command, not least in the distribution of development assistance. Multinational operations seldom lend themselves to this. Effective chains of ‘command’ cutting across civilian and military institutions and even NGOs are also very difficult. Nor do today’s interveners have the dedicated agencies necessary and people up to the task. Instead responsibility for peace-building in insecure environments is delegated largely to the armed forces.

But while peace-building is ultimately only successful when it can get economies moving and establish a virtuous cycle of economic growth, stability, jobs, prosperity, inclusion, investment, and more growth, militaries are not always the best – nor the cheapest – means of doing such crucial development work.

The Challenges of Afghanistan

Six years after the fall of the Taliban, the international mission in Afghanistan is beleaguered. Heavy fighting continues in the east and south. Between August 2006 and September 2007, for example, British troops fired off more than four million rounds of ammunition. In Helmand Province alone, they expended four times as many artillery rounds during this period than British forces used during the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

In other words, NATO’s task is getting harder, and the Taliban are an increasing threat to the government of President Karzai, the man who rejected the UN’s nomination of Paddy Ashdown as its special envoy to Afghanistan. Notwithstanding his callousness towards the foreign soldiers that have fought and died for the sake of his rule, Karzai’s pandering to Afghan nationalistic bloody-mindedness is detrimental to long-term Western interests.

For there are wider interests and concerns here that must be dealt with for the sake of global security. And Afghanistan could be the success hoped for in leading and leading the region in democracy, greater openness and better governance. Part of this difficulty is because the international effort in the Afghan peace-building missions has been characterised by a lack of commitment and coordination.

Co-ordinating military and civilian authorities, external and local, government and non-governmental in post-conflict missions is inherently difficult, nowhere more so if there are high levels of insecurity such as in Afghanistan. Put differently, development is tricky when people are trying to kill the developers.

Ashdown has proven himself in such business in Bosnia, where he was the High Representative. Afghanistan has lost out by his withdrawal. He would have brought a higher profile to the job and a level of confidence and commitment that Afghanistan seriously needs.

From the start, the Afghan mission was blighted by the Rumsfeldian light troop ‘footprint’, small numbers scattered across a largely impassable country the size of France. This shortage is today compounded by having to fight on two fronts in Iraq as well. No wonder that the US defence secretary Robert Gates recently berated NATO allies for not committing more troops to the hostile south of Afghanistan. The Germans for one have responded that they prefer to keep their 3,500 soldiers in the much safer north.

Any international peace-building mission has only a limited time to make a difference before local hospitality wears out. As one young British Royal Marine put it about patrolling in Helmand, “every time we go out, I feel they do not want us there. They are waiting to attack us or for us to leave”. President Karzai will know this as he delicately balances his domestic and international support, preferring to point fingers at others, in Pakistan and elsewhere, to explain his problems.

The fact that Ashdown initially accepted the post showed he believed in Afghanistan. It is time for the donors to lay down some home truths to the Afghan government and remind them how many lives have been lost and money spent on rebuilding what Soviets and then Afghans themselves had destroyed. Kabul also needs to realise that their police, soldiers and civilians, their sons and daughters, are also being killed.

Realise the Costs of Failure, Think Small

Afghanistan is the most ambitious mission in this peace-building ‘genre’ and the current flagship of international collaboration. Despite being widely supported, the military forces and the co-existing array of civilian agencies have not yet effectively stabilised or secured southern and eastern Afghanistan. If the mission fails, international resolve for another operation of this size will be difficult, if not impossible, to muster for some time. And it would have a profound and likely deleterious effect on NATO’s future and on the future of Afghanistan itself.

Fundamentally, the international community has to realise that such missions are inherently difficult. There is only a limited window in which to make a positive impression. That means peace-building has to think small, set clear achievable priorities over which to ensure co-ordination, and then be willing to step back and allow the local government to take over however imperfectly it manages the task.

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