

The Anthony Hyman Memorial Lecture

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The Case for a Light Footprint: The international project in Afghanistan

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I

Thank you for inviting me to be part of this occasion. It is an honour and a pleasure.

It is also a humbling experience for several reasons. Afghanistan is an extraordinarily complex subject. Moreover, the collective knowledge about Afghanistan assembled in this room far exceeds my own. Nevertheless, I shall venture forth.

The main argument I am presenting tonight has three steps. First, the US-led coalition— usually referred to as ‘the international community’ even though it is a composite of several communities - became deeply involved in Afghanistan without really intending to, or fully realizing what was happening. There was no grand strategy for either entry or exit. Second, we basically made a mess of it, partly because of the extraordinarily difficult situation in Afghanistan, and partly because of the inherent limits of liberal internationalism within which the project was conceived and executed. Thirdly, when considering future options, I argue that reducing our presence, especially in the military field, will not lead to a disaster on the ground, as is often claimed; on the contrary, is likely to move the conflict to a lower and more manageable level.

Let us consider the point where we are at today. By the middle of the year, there will be around 130 000 NATO and other allied forces in Afghanistan. That is more than the Soviet Union had at the height of its engagement. Aid commitments in the past has been in the magnitude of 5-8 billion USD a year, and the requirements for the Afghan National Development Strategy (2008-2013) is estimated to 10 billion a year. About 60 donors and 37 troop contributing countries are operating in the country. There are parallel structures on virtually all levels of government. International advisors are ubiquitous. About two-thirds of all aid is channelled through an ‘external budget’ that is administered directly by foreign donors. The recent US ‘surge’ has visibly deepened the international footprint. Large counter-insurgency operations are underway to defeat the insurgents and, in General McChrystal’s inimitable phrase, provide ‘government in a box’ to the local population.

What results has this enormous presence produced? There are some positive development indicators, particularly in the health and educational sector. On the other side of the ledger are massive corruption, poor governance, the uncertainty of economic growth in an aid bubble, and a steadily expanding insurgency. By late 2009, General McChrystal warned that NATO was on the point of losing the war and urgently requested more forces. Comparisons with other, ill-fated interventions in Vietnam and the Soviets in Afghanistan have become common. We are now at a point where, in effect, we have to fight our way to get out – the ‘surge’ announced by President Obama’s in December 2009 is widely understood as part of an exit strategy

II

The international involvement in Afghanistan in late 2001 started in the spirit of a 'light footprint', as outlined by Lakhdar Brahimi to the Security Council in November 2001. How did we get from this vision of a modest and indirect presence to the massive present involvement? Policy analysis offers three relevant frameworks for explanations.

In one perspective, policy is shaped by a fragmented decision-making process where numerous smaller decisions add up to 'policy'. Each decision is taken in response to specific demands and pressures, but to varying degrees is isolated from the broader policy context and is without the benefit of an overarching strategy. Thus, low-level, process rationalities prevail, particularly the perceived need to protect previous investments by investing more. The overall result is an unplanned, unforeseen and often unwanted course of action with limited possibilities for correction underway. In the language of public policy analysis, this is called 'disjointed incrementalism'; it is also known as a path to a quagmire. A second perspective claims that policy-makers realize they are on an unplanned course of action with likely unwanted consequences; they are warned and offered alternatives. Nevertheless, they persist on the doomed course due to hubris, personal ambition, overriding political considerations, or plain 'wooden-headedness'. This is the 'march of folly' that Barbara Tuchman explores (and deplores) in her landmark book of that name. In a third and quite different macro-perspective, policy can best be understood as a reflection of a deeper logic shaped by historical, social, political and economic factors that condition the response of nations or organizations towards certain kinds of problems.

Keeping these perspectives in mind, let us go back to the moment of the first, light footprint in Afghanistan. The U.S. decision in late 2001 to rely on a combination of Afghan ground forces and US airpower (which of course left a devastating imprint where it was applied), sprang from deep fears in the US military and national security establishment that deploying ground forces would mean following in the footsteps of the disastrous Soviet intervention. The US military leadership was adamant - no US 'boots on the ground'. Leading neo-conservatives agreed for several reasons. At a Congressional hearing in June 2002, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz rolled out a big map to demonstrate that Afghanistan – with its wide deserts and high mountains, filled with treacherous tribesmen – definitely was not a place for US troops. 'Nation-building' was off the map as well. Let the UN handle that, President Bush told Powell in November 2001.

On the UN side, there was caution and reluctance to get deeply involved. Brahimi, who had a lead role in defining UN policy, advocated a limited international role in accordance with the principle of national self-determination and in recognition of the past experience of foreign powers in Afghanistan, whose defeats were now almost mythologized. The Secretariat and much of the Security Council were still haunted by the organization's dismal performance in Somalia and the Balkan wars. Any suggestion that a UN role patterned after the direct administration in Kosovo and East Timor was quickly rejected. Afghanistan was simply too big, too complicated and too unfriendly an environment, Brahimi told the Security Council in mid-November. Hence, both the main powers and the UN embraced his catchy 'light footprint' phrase, but without specifying its meaning.

The next nine years is the story of a gradual but steady international involvement. The aid regime moved in immediately. Aid organizations that had worked out of Islamabad during the Taliban period shifted to Kabul. Needs assessments were undertaken and the first international pledging conference was held in Tokyo in January 2002, with commitments of 8.2 billion dollars. Sensing huge funds on the horizon, and citing the need for rapid assistance in a country emerging from some 25 years of war and dislocation, the international aid agencies flocked to Afghanistan. From then and onwards, the momentum towards a heavier footprint exhibited a clear dynamic. As the enormity of the reconstruction task became evident and problems arose, the international aid community responded by

increasing the flow of international resources. More money was pledged and more international consultants arrived to provide technical assistance.

Why was the response to always add more of the same rather than adjusting course, especially when new increments of funds and consultants did not produce the expected results? In part, the approach was inherent in the ideology of liberal internationalism that framed the state-building and peace-building dimensions and helped legitimize the intervention. The international community, after all, was in Afghanistan not simply to fight international terrorism, but also because it was in a position to help a country devastated by violence and poverty, and where the aid intervention had been warmly welcomed by a population devastated by decades of violence. The enormous gap between local needs and foreign aid-relevant capacity underlined the tendency in the international aid community to look to transfer of capital and expertise as critical ingredients. Organizational interests of the aid agencies also played a role. The Afghan reconstruction was an international aid bonanza. When things did not work as expected, adding more money and advice, and tightening control by sending more consultants, seemed an appropriate response.

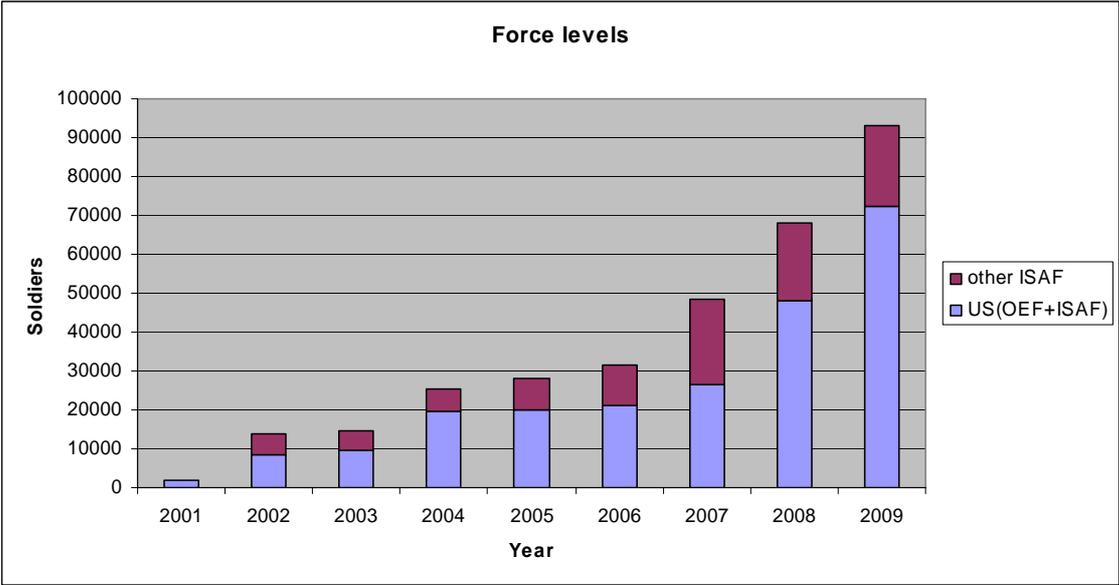
The ‘more-is-more’ argument was anchored as well in a broader understanding of the state-and peacebuilding which held that early and decisive investment is critical to stabilize the situation. In this light, the initially cautious commitment of the international community was thought to be a serious mistake – a lost opportunity to stabilize the situation, a failure to use a window which after 2-3 years was closing. Large increases in aid commitments and in military presence as well were thus not considered to be a continuation of earlier policy, but an essential correction of course. The view was articulated by a disparate but powerful lobby of foreign experts, diplomats, aid agencies and Afghan reformers. On the eve of the 2006 London aid conference, for instance, over twenty US Afghan specialists and former diplomats circulated an open letter calling for more aid to reconstruction and state-building. The low utilization rate of funds (at the time around 40%) was overlooked as the London conference pledged another \$US 10 billion in aid. At this point, failure to adjust course probably reflected limited imagination as well. The best the London conference could come up with was a contract-like list of detailed mutual obligations by the Afghan government and the donors (known as the London Compact), and a more elaborate mechanism of oversight boards.

As the insurgency gained momentum during 2004, the international military forces became a lobby group for additional aid as well. In part, the military wanted to use aid funds for force protection purposes; over time, local development and good governance came to be viewed as essential elements of the military’s strategy to defeat the insurgents and win over the local people. Although a counterinsurgency-strategy (COIN) was not formally announced until the appointment of McChrystal in 2009, elements had been in place much earlier, e.g. in the form of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) designed to promote local development and good governance under an umbrella of security provided by NATO or allied forces. Statements by NATO and national military leaders to the effect that this war could not be won by military means alone placed an extra burden on the non-military elements, which translated into additional investments in the economic and political sectors.

Along the way, two well-known mechanisms of deepening involvement became noticeable. Additional commitments were justified in part with reference to what the international community already had invested in the country (‘the investment trap’), and, particularly after the insurgency gained force in 2006-07, the need to protect the status of the project and its main sponsors. High government and NATO officials increasingly declared that NATO’s future was at stake in Afghanistan, as well as the safety of major Western capitals. This kind of declaratory policy obviously required additional investment (the ‘rhetoric trap’).

The military commitment had started to increase in 2004, when the US – wanting to focus on Iraq – requested greater contributions from its allies to Afghanistan. ISAF (the international security assistance force) started to expand out from Kabul to the provinces and NATO allies deployed small contingents of joint civil-military teams (PRTs). Those deploying into relative, secure areas hoped to sidestep US pressure for support to kinetic (i.e. offensive) operations against militants in more insecure areas. The steady expansion of ISAF forces from US allies from 2004 and onwards mainly reflected efforts to maintain alliance solidarity or good bilateral relations with the US, rather than any particular interests in Afghanistan.

Figure I: NATO and other allied forces in Afghanistan



Source: Human Security Report Project, Afghanistan Conflict Monitor, <http://www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/>

As the principal agent of the intervention and coalition leader, the US set the pace of the international military deployment. The escalation on the US side is therefore of particular interest. As the graph above shows, until 2007-8 the total numbers were small and the increase quite gradual, and as a result created little discussion at home. At Congressional hearings in mid-2004, for instance, some members did not even know how many American troops were in Afghanistan, and they did not seem to worry. In relation to Iraq, Afghanistan was a small war and a ‘good’ one – the original frontline in the Bush Administrations global war on terror. What, then, drove the escalation?

The starting point was an accidental trigger, that is, the attack on the US in 2001. Before 9/11, Afghanistan had not been of much interest to the US for over a decade. Washington had basically disengaged after the Soviets withdrew in 1989. When the US re-engaged in 2001, the intervention was premised on having the Afghans do the most of the fighting on the ground to eliminate the Taliban. The US would primarily provide airpower. A main lesson from that strategy, however, was negative. The leadership of the Taliban and their main Al Qaeda guests escaped, in part because the Afghans fought poorly or could not be relied upon, US military officials concluded. When the security situation started to deteriorate in some southeastern border provinces in 2003-4, Washington responded by deploying US troops. Major search- and-destroy operations in these areas provoked local resistance, setting off an escalatory dynamic. In 2005, more troops were sent to provide security for the elections. Thereafter, a steadily increasing insurgency led to further deployments, and by 2007-08, so did a strategy recast in terms of COIN and accelerated training of the Afghan security forces.

The large increases in 2009 were legacy of the Bush Administration and partly in the pipeline, but were reaffirmed by the Obama Administration. The decision rested more on a political calculus than

the military rationale that had underpinned previous deployments. For the Democrats, a strengthened military engagement in Afghanistan served to compensate politically for the commitment to withdraw from Iraq and thereby protect them from criticism of being weak in national security matters. The subsequent 'surge' in civilian and military personnel announced by Obama in December 2009 similarly makes sense as a political rather than military strategic decision, particularly in light of the simultaneous announcement that withdrawals would start in mid-2011. It was, as many noted, an apparent attempt to please all sides and ensure that Obama would be a second-term president. Or, as another American president had said in early 1963 in relation to Vietnam: He wanted to withdraw, but "I can't do it until 1965 – until after I'm re-elected".¹

IV

So far I have explained the increased US commitments in terms of the internal logic of the policy, in part as 'disjointed incrementalism' with its sub-rationalities of organizational interests, and investment and rhetoric traps, in part as logic of liberal internationalism. The prominence of internal US political considerations in determining strategy in Afghanistan adds a 'march of folly' touch to the latest surge. Was there, then, no overarching strategy?

What in one perspective appears as a disjointed set of sub-rationalities could also be viewed as a consistent policy designed to defeat international terrorism and their Afghan allies, and to that end ensure that Afghanistan was governed by a relatively stable government friendly to the West. Reducing poverty and increasing respect for human rights and democratic procedures were additional objectives. As the costs and problems of the task mounted – in part for reasons unrelated to the international involvement in Afghanistan, above all the war in Iraq – greater efforts and revision of strategies were required. There was no failure of imagination when a given strategy did not work. When a light footprint proved insufficient, heavier investments were made. When top-down state-building did not work, donors shifted to bottom-up. New policy priorities were defined as problems arose, including corruption. The military was innovative with respect to organization (PRTs) and strategy (COIN), and in the military area, with PRTs and changes to COIN when other approaches did not work.

This is the core of the official rationale for the Western-led involvement in Afghanistan. In one sense, it is right. The vision of a stable, friendly and more developed Afghanistan has framed the Western involvement since 2001 (allowing for national differences in policy objectives). But a vision is not a strategy. Rather, strategy has developed in a topsy-turvy manner as illustrated above. It is unlikely that the nations presently engaged in Afghanistan would in 2001 have approved of a strategy that entailed committing some 130 000 ground troops and aid to the tune of over 5 billion a year with no clear end or decisive progress in view after nearly a decade.

Some analysts claim that a grand strategy of a different kind related to oil and increased geopolitical reach in Central and Southwest Asia has driven Western, particularly US, policy towards Afghanistan. This analysis, of course, does not square with the evident lack of US interest in Afghanistan in the 1990s and the accidental nature of the 2001 intervention. To the extent that such strategic thinking is evident, it appears as a *post hoc* instrumental rationality. Once in Afghanistan, the US constructed bases and other support structures that can provide access in future conflicts in the area as well, including Iran, and fit with Pentagon's new concept of flexible, forward operational facilities. Similarly, once in Afghanistan, NATO has gained a wide range of operational experiences in dealing with unconventional threats that may be useful in the future. As NATO's Secretary-General, Anders

¹ Cited in Barbara W. Tuchman, The March of Folly : From Troy to Vietnam. New York, Ballantine Books, 1985, p. 303.

Fogh Rasmussen, recently put it in discussions of the new strategic concept for the alliance, future threats will require 'a fit and flexible' NATO.²

In sum, interpretations that stress the messy, unplanned and trapped elements of policy help explain why we ended up where we are in Afghanistan. That is not to discount the relevance of more general explanations, including Andrew Bacevich's theories of the tendency for US foreign policy to become militarized, but their explanatory value lies on another, more general level.

V

It is too early to conclude that the Western engagement in Afghanistan will end up as a 'march of folly'. Yet the voices of the sceptics regarding the effects of the deepening involvement are growing louder. I have been among them for some time. My scepticism relates to four main tensions in the international project, which I will briefly describe here.

The first principal contradiction is between ownership and control: 'We' (the international aid community as loosely constituted) want to exercise control over the reconstruction process, yet the principle of 'local ownership' is a pillar in the ideology of liberal internationalism and has to be formally observed. This gives a legitimating framework for Afghans to press their demands for shaping the direction of development and the distribution of benefits – in a word, genuine ownership.

The contradiction has found an extreme expression in the insurgency, but has marked the realm of non-violent politics as well. Here the tension works like sand in the machinery of the reconstruction and state-building project. Examples are legion, ranging from the early tug of war in 2003-04 between the ministry of finance and donors over the channelling of aid funds, to the near-continuous tension over sub-national administration, legal reforms, the role of *sharia*, the electoral process, corruption issues, military strategy and civilian casualties. The level of tension and conflict rose when the initial euphoria that in many parts followed the fall of Taliban in 2001 was replaced by the messy reality of state- and peace-building, and again when the growing insurgency undermined both processes. The increasing recognition that the NATO presence had a limited time horizon, and that some accommodation with the insurgents was probable, further deepened the division between the Afghans and the internationals. Basically, the internationals have the option of leaving, while most Afghans do not and have to make the best of the situation. The steadily deteriorating relationship between President Karzai and his major Western backers from 2008 onwards is symptomatic of the difficult situation.

Second, there is a contradiction between aid inflows and sustainability. The huge discrepancy between aid inflows and domestic legal revenues has turned post-Taliban Afghanistan into a classic rentier state. The government is more dependent upon international capital than any other Afghan regime, including the communist regime. While rentier states based on natural resources such as oil and diamonds or foreign aid are inherently fragile, rentier states based on foreign aid have even more uncertain futures insofar as foreign assistance is shaped by strategic interests that can shift rapidly. Recognising this as a recurrent feature of their history, Afghans naturally have sought to maximise aid in the short run, and have extracted pledges at international conferences that exceed the country's absorptive capacity, particularly in relation to project and fiscal management. Donors have responded by channelling money outside the Afghan government through the 'external budget'. When first introduced in 2004-05, the external budget was an estimated three times as large as the state budget; by 2008-09, it had more than doubled in size. This routing of aid failed to strengthen the role of the state or assure public monitoring and accountability. A vicious cycle was established that undermined local capacity-building required for sustainable state-building.

² <http://andersfogh.info/2010/02/23/from-washington-a-flexible-nato-and-a-secure-afghanistan/>

Third, there is a contradiction between dependence and democratisation. The rentier state also inhibits the development of a democratic polity. The main argument, which has been firmly established in the literature, is that accountability follows the direction of resource flows. With the national budget mostly financed by foreign governments and institutions, the Afghan government's major responsibility in accounting for the use of these funds is towards the donors rather than its own people. The same applies to earlier Afghan regimes that were heavily dependent on external funding. In his seminal study of Afghan political development, Rubin concludes that Daoud's rentier income from foreign aid and revenue from sales of natural gas had dysfunctional political effects. 'Renewed external revenues relieved Daoud of whatever incentives he might have had to make his government accountable'.³ This could equally be said about those who led the post-2001 government.

Fourth, there is a contradiction between effective state-building and legitimacy. The main justification for the deepening international involvement was the need to create an effective state that could be a trusted ally in the fight against international terrorism. The question arose, however, what would be the legitimacy of this state? Traditionally, religion and nationalism have been the main sources of legitimacy for Afghan regimes and the Afghan state. Neither can serve to legitimize the government or the state-building venture in a post-Taliban Afghanistan where the government is financed by and allied to the West, and where its Western allies are fighting other Afghans who have declared *jihad* to rid the country of the infidel foreign presence and its local clients.

A state heavily dependent on international capital and foreign military forces must develop an alternative legitimising ideology. In post-Taliban Afghanistan, 'good governance' moved to the fore as the putative central source of legitimacy. Afghan reformers joined the Western aid community and the UN in invoking the concept of the 'social contract' familiar from Western liberal thinking. A state that provided a measure of security, justice and basic social services was believed to create its own legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan people. 'Good governance' would create legitimacy and hence popular support. Unlike Islam and nationalism, however, 'good governance' exerts no force merely by virtue of its ideational existence; it has to deliver, and hence is a more demanding source of legitimacy.

Finally, the rapid expansion of the armed forces has created series tensions within the state-building project. First, it drained the budget and increased dependence on foreign aid. The World Bank had already in 2004-05 warned that an Afghan army of 70,000 was not financially viable. Subsequent expansions were severely criticised by Bank experts on the same ground – the armed forces would either bankrupt the country or become a wholly foreign-owned subsidiary. Second, to the extent that the armed forces became a strong, professional institution, it would create severe imbalance in relations between the military and civilian authorities. Given the weakness of civilian political institutions, civilian oversight would be difficult. Afghanistan's armed forces have twice staged a coup in recent history, in 1973 and 1978, both times with calamitous consequences. Third, the near-complete dependence on foreign, mainly US and EU, funds for salaries, training and equipment raises questions both within Afghanistan and in the region about whose interests the Afghan armed forces serve.

VI

The insurgency has had a multiplier effect on the contradictions of the state-building project. The war has produced demands for more and faster results, and hence for more external control and greater presence. Military objectives and institutions are favoured in the reconstruction. Increasing warfare

³ Barnett R. Rubin, The fragmentation of Afghanistan : State formation and collapse in the international system: New Haven, CT, Yale University Press. 1995, p. 75.

and Western presence undermines the legitimacy of the government. These pressures created counter-pressures which sharpen the tensions.

What, then, can be done? What are the policy implications of this analysis? There are basically two courses of action. One is to add sufficient foreign capital, expertise and forces to in effect overcome the contradictions. The foreign presence would be there for the very long haul and take an overtly direct role in decision-making; in effect, institute 'shared sovereignty'. This course of action has been tried, albeit on a modest scale, for the past eight years of gradually deepening involvement, culminating in the military and civilian surge announced by President Barack Obama in December 2009. The results have not been convincing. A more radical version of the same policy, entailing resources on a scale that might bring the achievement of the intervention's stated objectives within reach, is likely to meet political resistance in the Western countries as well as in Afghanistan.

The logical alternative is to place greater reliance on the Afghan government to deal with the problems of both the insurgency and the reconstruction. A reduction in the international presence would at least reduce the associated tensions and contradictions discussed above. This course of action also entails difficulties and conflicts. Any Afghan government has to face the problems of a mounting insurgency, a fragmented society, a deeply divided polity and a complex regional context. Nevertheless, to take only the insurgency, it is clear that in large part it is driven by local conflict over land, water and local power, particularly between the tribes and solidarity groups that were pushed out in 2001 and those who seized power after 2001. Such conflicts can better be addressed without a deeply disturbing foreign military presence. The often-cited fear that a NATO military withdrawal will spark renewed civil war between regional and ethnic factions is more influenced by the memory of the previous civil war in the 1990s than by an assessment of current regional-ethnic relations. Importantly, many faction leaders today have strong economic and political interests in the status quo. A NATO withdrawal, moreover, is unlikely to be total and sudden. Maintaining a residual international force in Kabul would help prevent a repeat of the civil war that occurred in the 1990s, which was fought over control of the capital. Overall, it seems that a gradual reduction in the prominent Western presence may give space for national and regional forces to explore compromises and a regional balance of power that will permit the development of a less violent reconstruction of the state and economy in Afghanistan. By early 2010, this seemed to be the way developments were going