

Question (R4.10): *Is the current U.S. approach to supporting Afghanistan beneficial? Or does it promote a cycle of dependency and counter-productive activities in the region? What strategic and local factors would need to be considered, managed and accepted in any significant change in military and/or other support?*

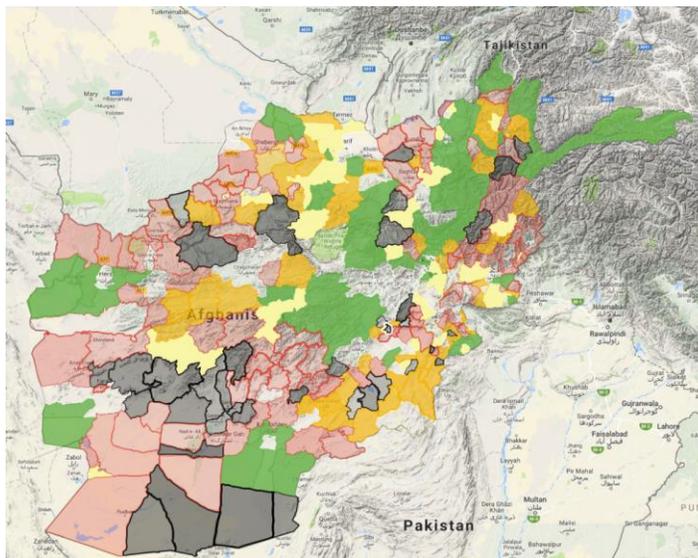
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Executive Summary

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois, NSI

Asked about any constructive aspects of the current US approach in Afghanistan the experts who contributed to this Reach-back report, to a one responded with lengthy, well-considered but scathing reviews of the past fifteen years of US/NATO policy and operations in Afghanistan. The majority of the experts -- who include practitioners and political scientists, historians and hydrologists with years of on-the-ground experience with Afghanistan -- felt there is nothing to commend current US policy toward Afghanistan. The others did not address the question.

In fact, most experts took the tack that the current US approach to Afghanistan (which they date to the "mission creep" that began in 2001) is itself the source of the insecurity, instability and Taliban resurgence happening now in Afghanistan.



Regions currently under GoA vs Taliban control

Legend: Black areas = Full Taliban control; Red = Heavily Contested; Orange = Contested; Yellow = Taliban presence; Green = Minimal presence; Gray = unknown.

Source: FDD's Long War Journal, 28 March 2017
<http://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2017/03/afghan-taliban-lists-percent-of-country-under-the-control-of-mujahideen.php> based on Taliban report: *Percent of Country under the control of Mujahideen*

The US Approach in Afghanistan

The central themes of the experts' arguments can be summarized in two main points:

#1: State-building efforts detract from the real US interest in Afghanistan: security

Professor Shalini Venturelli (AU) argues that US activities in Afghanistan have drifted away from what is the true national interest in Afghanistan (security) to focusing on governance and state-building. Along with Spencer Meredith (NDU) she argues that the US must refine the focus of its approach to jettison objectives such as state-building and democratization that have distracted the US from issues that we have the relevant power to impact. Venturelli sees no value to US security from getting involved in the highly culturally-dependent issue of how a nation governs itself.

Instead: Venturelli argues in favor of a major reconceptualization of US policy in Afghanistan that focuses strongly on what is truly the core (and only reasonable) US mission there: US security. She suggests “three concrete components” of a reconceived US mission: 1) preventing and deterring terror group gains in Afghanistan by “expanding counter-terrorism operations in the AF-PAL region;” 2) preventing Afghanistan from becoming a major terror safe haven; and 3) building the capacity of the Afghan National Army (ANA) guided by a more sophisticated and culturally relevant training model that taps into the “indigenous fighting tradition” – (what Dr. Shireen Khan Burki refers to as Afghanistan’s “xenophobic warrior” population.) She cautions that continuing with the current approach of incrementally changing the US approach around the margins as circumstances dictate has already had “devastating consequences” and could be worse than withdrawing US military support altogether.

#2: There is insufficient socio-cultural foundation and local trust to support construction of centralized democracy in Afghanistan: These efforts were doomed to fail from the start

The experts who commented on the political or state-building aspects of the US approach did not mince words, referring to it as: “impractical and expensive,” the result of “overconfidence bordering on insanity” and “hopelessly corrupted and detrimental.” Spencer Meredith (NDU) believes that the US approach is based on the faulty assumption that localized/decentralized governance is at odds with a legitimate and capable national government. Others are highly critical of efforts to construct a Western-style centralized political system in Afghanistan with a very feeble foundation in Afghan political history, social organization or culture. It was doomed from the start. Shalini Venturelli (AU) reckons that “not all the wealth and expertise of the US and its NATO allies” would be sufficient to build a sustainable democratic state in Afghanistan because it would be out of line with the social, cultural and political traditions and expectations of the majority of the Afghan population.

Instead: The contributors who commented on this point agreed that rather than Western expectations of good governance and social and political stability, if the US chooses to remain involved in state-building in Afghanistan, its efforts must refocus on the expectations of the Afghan people. Venturelli points out that Afghan society already contains “highly evolved, complex and variable systems of social order that fall outside the capabilities of

Western administrative science.” Specifically, Spencer Meredith (NDU) recommends that the US should patiently pursue a bottom-up, culturally and historically grounded approach to political development. Despite the fact he says that analysts in DC and certainly political elites in the central government in Kabul for obvious reasons do not like this option, it is the only one with a reasonable chance of producing a broadly accepted and legitimate government.

Does the US approach promote a cycle of dependency and counter-productive activities?

The majority opinion among the expert contributors to the Reach-back report is that the current US approach in Afghanistan does promote dependency and is counter-productive. Vern Liebl (CAOCL) among others questions why anyone would be surprised by the negative consequences of pouring billions of dollars of donor money into a devastatingly impoverished country. This aid has fueled elite corruption at the expense of the poorest Afghans which has in turn soured public opinion even more on the US-imposed central government and likely aided the resurgence of the popular acceptance of the Taliban. Benjamin Hopkins (GWU) sees the question of Afghan dependency itself is insulting to Afghans arguing that it is the West’s pursuit of “unrealistic policies” in Afghanistan not some Afghani flaw that has generated deleterious cycles. In addition to fueling government corruption for example, US policy has strapped the Kabul Government with unsustainable government institutions including a security force that “is well beyond the ability of the country to sustain. That said, “anti-corruption” measures are not the solution here. Shalini Venturelli cautions that Westerners/outsideers can easily misunderstand local norms of human networking and in correctly label some social-required activities as corruption. Rather than dismissing social influence networks outright, Venturelli recommends leveraging this existing system of relationships to advance security interests in Afghanistan.

What strategic factors should guide changes in US military or other support?

The authors are clear on this point: we cannot assess our strategic approach without a strategic vision. Reflecting the perspectives of her fellow contributors, Shireen Khan Burki asks the essential question: “What exactly is the strategic mission of the US vis-à-vis Afghanistan?” There is consensus among the experts who feel that the US approach has lacked a clear articulation of US goals and objectives in Afghanistan. Many are skeptical that there is a coherent strategic vision or set of mission objectives that would align with all the foreign activities and aid in Afghanistan. At the very least if they have been articulated, they have not been stated clearly in public. The experts pose a number of other questions that might serve as guides to review US policy in Afghanistan:

- *“What are American goals in the country and how do they relate to US national interests?”*
- *“Who is the enemy?”*

There is a line of reasoning among the contributors that common responses to this question, for example, counter-terrorism, denying terror groups safe havens, ring hollow. First, there are many other places around the world including Pakistan that violent political networks can easily establish a presence, and secondly our own presence in Afghanistan has in fact exacerbated not minimized the ability of terror networks to recruit and operate in the country.

- *“What if any interest [does] the US [have] in a stable vs. democratic Afghanistan?”*
In other words, what are US priorities regarding an acceptable political outcome if not all aspects can be achieved.
- *Is it the mission of the US to fundamentally change Afghanistan?*

SME Input

Comments on the US Approach to Afghanistan

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The current approach promotes dependency and is counter-productive, but not because it is ineffective for the stated goals. Rather the approach is based on flawed assumptions about the nature of democracy and democratization. The US model is historically contingent, both to the times of its origin and the times of its development along the way. The same holds for other democratic experiments throughout the last few centuries. However, this contextual nature does not preclude certain commonalities, namely the role of responsive government. The idea that governing elites are beholden in some fashion to the consent of the government is a universal constant, even though the degree of responsiveness and the types of issues to be considered varies greatly across political systems, geographies and epochs of time.

The focus for Afghanistan needs first to be on political development, with realistic assessments of the feasibility of federalism, which comes up short compared to diffusing authorities to local governance. VSO's in Afghanistan and even a casual glance at India show that localism does not need to mean rejection of the principles and practices of a national government. It simply means this part of democratization must be part of the debate, not assumed. Even so, this more appropriate responsive bottom-up approach to government is a hard sell to capital region elites (both in Kabul and DC), despite having a more grounded basis for success historically than imposition of “democracy” that begins with the federal center.

In particular, localism allows for greater buy-in, even if that buying is to “opt out” of the political process. In the past, this has become a form of tacit legitimacy that can grow if responsiveness grows along with the provision of goods and services. The challenge is that this takes time and resources that are both domestically contextual – what does Afghanistan have that is viable on domestic and international markets – and path dependent (late developers have different opportunities and constraints than their historical predecessors). At the same time, there are core elements of Afghanistan that currently hold the country together, and additional ones can be identified / highlighted / created. The point is to engage in an honest research agenda to see what can be done, the tools needed vs. tools at hand, and ultimately, what, if any interest the US has in a stable vs. democratic Afghanistan.

Reconceptualizing strategies for mission success In the Afghanistan conflict

Dr. Shalini Venturelli
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Walking away fast or slow from Afghanistan (AFG) is not an option for the United States. This can be discovered from deep assessment and rapid reformulation of engagement that preserves and protects U.S. security interests, or it can be realized the hard way through irreversible damage to national/international security and stability stretching into the foreseeable future. The U.S. confronts a grave threat to its national security and international power and influence in the current state of conflict in AFG. The measurable drivers have gained momentum: population confidence in government is steeply declining, political instability is increasing, Afghan security forces are degrading, terrorist networks are spreading and taking control province-by-province, and geostrategic players are coordinating to deny the U.S. access and freedom of maneuver in this vital Southwest Asian region that forms one of the keystones to Indo-Eurasian and Middle East stability. Similar to withdrawal from Iraq since 2010, the U.S. in AFG is paying a disproportionate price since 2014 for withdrawal of troops to a small footprint, a decision that carried certainty of negative strategic outcomes to U.S. and Afghan security that was apparent at the time across every type of indicator. In a space of less than three years, key players in the conflict have multiplied and AFG stands primed for the taking by combined threats from the Taliban, ISIS-K, Al Qaeda, Haqqani Network, other terror networks, Iran, Russia, Pakistan, China, and international criminal drug networks. All seek to exploit and gain from Afghanistan's enduring strategic location, its rich mineral resources, its opium production, economic potential and ungoverned territory that allows for open fielding of proxy armies to service the power ambitions of regional players. The U.S.'s global geostrategic advantage, including its AFG security component, keeps American safe and the world more stable and secure. Yet AFG stands teetering on the edge of precipitating broader regional collapse, a widening war, globalization of terrorist organizations—all with irreparable detriment to U.S. global dominance.

The way ahead requires first and foremost, a fundamental reconceptualization of the Afghan problem-set and corresponding redesign of strategy. This assessment addresses this need by outlining a reconstituted core mission grounded in advanced operating concepts and strategies aimed at reversing current trends and regaining mission success in the high-stakes Afghan conflict.

Reconstitute the Core U.S. Mission

Contrary to prevailing assumptions, the AFG puzzle in Southwest Asia is no less important to U.S. global strategic and security interests than is the Middle East region. In reality, the two are closely interlinked in terms of a contiguous zone of compelling security interest that stretches from Egypt to South Asia, encompassing the borders of Eurasian states, as well as Russia and China. Within this zone, terrorist organizations secure their core basing of territorial control inside failed states to launch recruitment and operations worldwide. Also within this trans-continental band are found a confluence of dangerous adversaries such as Iran poised to globally export its Islamic revolution, nuclearize its transregional dominance, destabilize

surrounding regions of the Middle East and AFG (on opposite ends of its territorial borders), and expel the U.S. from these regions. Russia and China, meanwhile, are employing active measures to simultaneously undermine U.S. influence and role in both regions and consolidate dominance across Eurasia, Middle East, Southwest and South Asia, eventually joining these key pieces with East Asia to complete the circle of control. Finally, a reckless nuclear Pakistan runs relentless interventions in AFG, offers safe havens to terrorist organizations and will succeed if unchecked in toppling the Afghan government, defenestrating the country's security forces, and installing proxy militias such as a militant, unreformed Taliban and its terrorist partners. Pakistan needs control over AFG to leverage its containment of India where it runs multiple terror networks to intimidate governments and populations. Its actions have wider spillover effects that already threaten export of terror militias to the next lateral zone, namely, Southeast Asia. Given this strategic environment, the U.S. should reconstitute its core mission in AFG to target the region's critical importance in protecting and advancing U.S. national security and geostrategic interests.

The U.S. Core Mission: Going forward, the U.S. core mission should be reconstituted to focus on three concrete components aimed firmly at U.S. security:

- I. **Prevent and deter terrorist capture of AFG:** Terrorists seek above all to capture failed states as a means to globalize the spread of violent extremism and radical Islam, and to permanently alter international security parameters upheld by the U.S. By expanding counter-terrorism operations in the AF-PAK region, this terrorist aspiration would be denied.
- II. **Prevent AFG from becoming a launch pad for Global Jihadist operations:** Once terrorists seize and control a critical mass of Afghan territory, they will operate with impunity and the conflict dynamics set in motion will be irrevocable. Jihadist networks worldwide are prepared to converge on the region to form alliances, merge organizations, innovate and share knowledge freely across jihadist platforms, and launch operations across the world, including within the U.S. homeland. This in turn will fuel recruitment and flow of fighters into the country. Such outcomes further reinforce the priority of a stronger U.S. posture in counter-terrorism campaigns to disrupt and destroy terror network-formation and propagation within AFG.
- III. **Enhance the security capability of the Afghan National Army (ANA) partner forces through advising, training and partnered operations, by building on more advanced advising models and the ANA's indigenous fighting tradition:** Instead of splintering the U.S. effort between building the administrative state (see below) and partnering with the ANA, the primary focus of U.S. efforts should be targeted to enhancing the Afghan military's fighting forces in their capability to secure the country from terrorist capture and control. TAA efforts should adopt advanced advising models (see below) and extend down from the corps level to subordinate brigade and kandak units with the aim of accelerating essential war-fighting functions of partner combat units. This should be accomplished with or without cooperation or partner support to the different elements and organizations of the Afghan National Police (ANP), since policing in this particular sociocultural environment can never be achieved by external design measures.

In brief, this mission concept is directed entirely on counter-terrorism and the Afghan Army. It means that the **core mission should no longer include:** a) The impractical, unattainable, and

cost-prohibitive goal of building the centralized administrative state and its apparatus (see below). While the Afghan administrative and regulatory apparatus is desirable and important in itself, the nation-state governance problem-set is ultimately neither a precondition for, nor essential to the preservation of U.S. security interests (see below). This assessment addresses the failure of the centralized administrative state to achieve legitimacy and acceptance, and argues it has become one of the drivers of the conflict. Imposing the western governance model both in AFG and in Iraq has been highly detrimental to the security environment. Other multiple-order dimensions of the governance problem-set are analyzed throughout the paper. b) The unachievable goal of stabilization is an ideal that never has nor ever can be realized in the Afghan sociopolitical and strategic context (see below). Afghans have never known a time—except for fleeting and fragmentary intervals—when the country was stable or entirely free from conflict. The U.S. is setting its mission threshold unrealistically high and at excessive American human and material cost in pursuit of western expectations rather than the core fundamentals that resonate with the population. Neither the U.S. nor its NATO allies have the knowledge and influence adequate to transforming the structural constants of AFG (see below). The U.S. can achieve its mission to advance its national security without engaging in senseless struggle to stabilize volatile human systems in regions governed by historical norms of instability.

Option Hazards

Three alternative options pose great hazard to the United States and should be rejected. 1) Withdrawal hazard: Given costs thus far in blood and treasure, economic cost in multiple billions annually, and continued lack of stability, there are justifiable reasons for the American public to discontinue its support for U.S. involvement in Afghanistan. Yet Americans risk far greater threat and even higher costs of involvement in future years if Afghanistan is captured by terrorist organizations to serve as platform for projection of extensive coordinated and more frequent terrorist operations executed on the homeland and homelands of our allies. Turning U.S. national territory into a battleground has been the strategic aim of ISIS for some time (see author's study for SMA). The realistic possibility of this outcome should steel U.S. purpose to deny terror organizations this objective and to secure the homeland through expanded counter-terror operations in AF-PAK. 2) Maintain-course hazard: The option of continuing the current mission as instituted since the withdrawal of American combat operations and retreat of ANA advising at the end of 2014 has triggered cumulative and accelerating security deterioration across AFG. Terror groups have captured over a third of the country and their territorial footprint will increase if the U.S. mission remains unchanged. Meanwhile, the ANA's capability is degrading at a rate hurtling to the tipping point, where entropy becomes inevitable and the Army can no longer be operationally mobilized. The option of maintenance of mission is thus effectually equivalent in result to complete withdrawal of the U.S. 3) Incrementalism hazard: The third option advanced by many in the past eight years and going forward is to periodically and incrementally adjust levels of U.S. involvement in response to need. This type of modulation of effort has had devastating consequences in feeding the growth of enhanced resilience across terror network organizational and operational capabilities whereby U.S. increments of personnel and assistance act as a press-pulse environmental mechanism that merely contributes to disproportionate bursts in jihadist tactical, informational and strategic growth. In essence, this approach has been feeding evolutionary inflation of the conflict—precisely the opposite of mission goals. It has also conditioned population perception to expect failure by the security forces to protect them and increased their resolve to turn to alternative

providers of security such as terror networks, power networks, violent militias and criminal networks (see below). This option therefore fuels momentum toward collapse of the state to a rump and its final capture by a consortium of terrorist networks including the Taliban, ISIS-K and Al Qaeda. Incrementalism is indeed worse than withdrawal: it delivers grave damage to U.S. influence worldwide, because the outcome would signal decisive defeat of a global power by non-state actors, and motivate our partners to seek alliances with the U.S.'s geostrategic near-peer adversaries who stand-by to pick up the pieces.

Advanced Operating Concepts for Mission Success: Critical Lessons

The author has conducted in-depth scientific field investigations of the Afghan conflict. Following is a sampling of findings on gaps identified and new operating concepts and models required for mission success:

Mitigating the 'Natural State': AFG has been an enduring 'natural' state for millennia -- long before it was a nation-state meeting modern international standards. It may never in fact become a functioning nation-state, but it will always remain a 'natural state'. While its populations are as diverse as the rugged terrain and never unified around a single identity, its geography has allowed them to defend its natural mountainous and desert borders from external invasion and conquest—hence the 'natural state' created by the enduring and determinative synergy of human systems and natural environments. Belief in the organic fusion of AFG geography and identity is conceptually and trans-generationally inscribed in the active cognition of Afghanistan's dominant population groups, and shapes their deep perceptions of current social reality. The nation-state, by stark contrast, is a modern political invention infused with western cultural assumptions of proper administrative systems-complexity imposed on traditional human systems for purposes of international order. Central to the modern nation-state technological assumption is the autonomic formation-processes of a strong sense of national identity and nationalism as a primary identity unifying populations through successful subordination of primordial and pre-political identities of race, ethnicity, tribe, social class and religion. But to be stable in the most elementary sense, the modern nation state has first to be conceived and imagined within the deep belief of the population before it can exist in an administrative and institutional form. Without deep imagining that arises and is shared across the major population groups, including the rank and file of Afghan fighting forces, the Afghan nation state will not resonate and adhere in this resilient sociocultural environment across harsh terrain containing highly evolved, complex and variable systems of social order that fall outside the capabilities of western administrative science and structures. It is within this pre-existent 'natural' Afghan state construct that the U.S. should leverage its mission with the Afghan military to advance U.S. national security interests, and the population's interests to pursue their cultural identities and preferred forms of life.

Governance & Empowerment: The governance model which the U.S. and its allies have been struggling to execute in AFG is patently unworkable for AFG leaders, and is neither recognizable nor accepted by the population. Comparative political and historical analysis demonstrates that governance systems are first and foremost the product of particular sociocultural systems. There are no exceptions-- irrespective of democratic, autocratic, authoritarian or tribal models. Even within the single category of democracy, there is a vast morphology in cultural typologies whereby specific population compositions and traditions determine the form in which a democratic model is structurally and functionally expressed in a specific geographic ecosystem.

In international order, there is no single cultural model of democracy, autocracy, dictatorship or tribal self-governance, and to neglect this in design and implementation of governance for AFG is to accept defeat from the outset. Not all the wealth and expertise of the U.S. and its NATO allies could possibly build and maintain a modern administrative state in AFG because it is fundamentally irreconcilable with the sociocultural and sociopolitical traditions, desires and expectations of major Afghan population groups. A second critical lesson from sixty decades of intervention and development programs is that knowledge transfer from the west to unstable developing societies is seldom absorbed and diffused, maintained, or developed further by the indigenous human system. Western knowledge-transfers are inherently fragile because they are top-down knowledge flows instead of emergent from local populations who utilize-apply information and governance traditions they already trust or generate, and can take ownership of through independent—not dependent—problem-solving. By contrast, western knowledge-transfers on effective governance are regarded through the AFG population lens as an imposition, even threat that does not empower them but the leaders in Kabul who seek the monopoly of power. Predictably, these transfers evaporate once external advisors leave and communities return to their own meaningful and trusted cultural traditions of governance and decision-making that endures the test of time. The institutionalized and procedural national *Jirga* is a quick-fix western technology that placates the west and international community, including western social science, but by no means the key expectations and demands arising from the indigenous human system. However, a quite different concept and model of socioculturally appropriate knowledge-transfer could be designed to empower communities who can then take ownership of the results, but this type of more effective approach, sadly, has not been appropriately conceived and prioritized for execution in AFG. In the absence of developing a robust model of governance which the population recognizes as legitimate and grounded in their cherished cultural traditions, the U.S. ought never have undertaken to fashion a modern administrative state that today remains but an external façade. The current AFG governance model-design meets benchmarks of legitimacy only in the eyes of western science and expertise, western monitoring organizations, and western checklists for institutional structural requirements. After more than a decade in operation and billions in expenditure, governance systems the U.S. and its allies have been struggling to build have very low if any likelihood of taking root in AFG—at least in this century. The Afghan population does not acknowledge the administrative state with its complex systems of power management and control as an organizational typology they can trust and own. To them, it is an unfamiliar and ‘unjust’ (we Americans prefer the term ‘corrupt’) system imposed from the top and thus deserves to be robbed and exploited without social censure. Key population groups perceive Kabul’s centralized governance as neither of nor for the people, and thus lacks moral advantage relative to sociocultural practices of indigenous governance that reliably reproduce the social order and modes of justice that fit with an independent way of life for communities across AFG. Unless the model is redesigned for a better sociocultural fit that resonates with population confidence, we may assess the U.S./NATO governance model as one of the drivers of the Afghan conflict.

Managing Stabilization: Perhaps no other element of U.S./NATO methodology better demonstrates this convergence of misguided assumptions than does the goal of stabilization in AFG. The author’s recent study for SMA of regional instability reveals the underlying human systems mechanisms for managing homeostatic levels of conflict within a historical range of volatility specific to each human environment, as well as the mechanisms by which homeostasis and its control systems break down –thus tipping a country or region into conflict intensity, and

even further, into collapse. Applying this model to AFG, we see that fluctuations in levels of conflict intensity have characterized its human environment continuously since it was inhabited, up to the present day. Its populations have co-existed in a state of self-regulating contestation, alliances, rivalry and warfare that has never tipped its human geography out of control or into collapse. The AFG conflict environment is chronic and self-containable. Governments rise and fall, the devastation wreaked by foreign invaders ebbs and flows, but the mosaic of cultural groupings and their interactional and evolving human systems of homeostasis endures. In fact, the concept of 'peace' in the western sense is unknown in this region. To Afghans, peace is the freedom of the community to be free of intervention and control by centralized systems of power and influence. And yet, that is ironically and precisely what the U.S. and its NATO allies intend to deliver: centralized social control, an anathema to the majority of Afghan communities that inhabit terrain beyond the systems-world of Kabul favored by the west. Preoccupation with stabilization is futile and can never be achieved since a historical range of volatility is the self-regulating structural constant of the country. Instead, the U.S. should re-prioritize its concrete security mission of denying AFG to radical terror organizations with global ambition and intent; and it should focus its advising efforts on building a strong and capable Afghan army willing to fight and die to defend its territory from terrorist strongholds.

'Corruption' & Legitimacy: U.S./NATO preoccupation with 'corruption' in AFG, as nested within the futile stabilization problem-set, is hindering U.S. effectiveness on its core mission. The notion of corruption is built on a stack of assumptions inapplicable to AFG. First, what the west sees as corruption Afghans see as the normal, proper and efficient use of the human network system for resource distribution and access points to power and information flows. Such systems are replicated across cultures and regions, found in many western and non-western countries and at all levels of development and modernization. Thus, networks in Southern and Eastern Europe, South and Southeast Asia, East Asia, Latin America and across all regions of Africa show similar sociocultural patterns of network formation for power sharing, information sharing and resource distribution. Western social science, however reluctantly, is forced to conclude that network participation is in fact the normative and not deviant social practice that characterizes the fundamental structure and function of human systems worldwide. It is therefore, a deeply-conserved trait in cultural evolution of the human ecosystem, and thus highly robust and resilient in time and space across environmental shifts. The concerted attempt to eradicate network formation and function in the disposition of power and resources is obstructing the U.S. and its allies from leveraging this very structure and taking this opportunity to shape the system for greater security and efficiency. Second, every individual family and community in AFG must belong to multiple networks to ensure survival, reduce risk, build stable environments, gain access to economic markets, create opportunities for advancement, gain life insurance for self, family and clan, and seek security from hostile adversaries. This is the unwritten law of the land, the intangible social contract. Often overlooked in western anti-corruption campaigns is the reality that membership in networks is inter-generationally inherited, and families and communities cannot opt out of a network once they or their ancestors have joined. This is a social-binding system of mutual obligation. Failure to honor one's obligation to the network ('if you take or receive, then you must contribute') is a grave infraction for which one must perish by ostracization or by violent death. In a sociocultural environment where institutional and administrative governance has been weak or non-existent since recorded time, the network system takes on the role of predictive rule-making and social regulation applicable to all. As power, information and resources flow through the network, they become available to those with access through binding allegiance to

network obligations. Since it can never be eradicated or even reduced in its reach and density, going to war against corruption is akin to waging war against Afghan culture and society. The result is not only failure, it fuels deeply negative perceptions of the U.S. role among the population, and is an enormous drain on U.S. resources and personnel effort. More serious, the anti-corruption effort has become a permanent distraction from the U.S.'s national security mission which is to enhance the ANA's military capabilities and to partner with them in deterring and eliminating violent jihadist networks from Afghan territory and in their safe havens across the border.

Effective ANSF Advising Model: It simply cannot be overstated that, in the long run, the operational capability of the ANA is one of the most critical components of the U.S. mission in AFG, with the only other being effective and sustained U.S. counter-terrorism operations. Dysfunctional states with dysfunctional politics and governance are plentiful throughout all regions. Yet a subset of states continues to function for one overriding reason: a strong military willing and able to defend the nation's territory. Examples include Pakistan, Egypt, Turkey, the Central Eurasian states, Myanmar, among many others. In reality, the Indo-Eurasian populations expect a strong military as a requirement of stability, even as they disregard dysfunctional governance. These populations, as in AFG, see the military as the only organization that can potentially command unified support. If we pursue the governance targets, the mission will fail; but if we pursue the building and enhancement of a strong military in the Indo-Eurasian tradition, the overall mission will succeed. The empirical evidence thus far shows that spreading out the U.S./NATO effort over multiple organizations such as terrorist organizations, the ANA, the police, the administrative state and stabilization development projects has severely impacted the core mission and obstructed real progress on U.S. national security goals. The current approach has also contributed to considerable waste of resources and personnel time in AFG. There are few results to show and even fewer indications these efforts have successfully transferred knowledge, institutions and know-how to population and leadership, or can be indigenously maintained and become self-sustaining.

The author has extensively documented through field studies what a highly effective advising model that rapidly enhances ANA operational capability looks like in terms of design-concept and execution on the ground. The model was innovated by U.S. advising units in the field, but their method and achievements do not appear to have been adopted-diffused more widely. These units demonstrated through exceedingly effective ANA-led operations, how integration of much deeper sociocultural, messaging, communication, motivational, organizational and leadership advising targeted to force identity and essential war-fighting functions such as intelligence, operations, and logistics can quickly identify and mitigate obstacles to capability gains, and measurably enhance operational performance and results. More significant, this robust knowledge-transfer advising model innovated by U.S. units and personnel in the field is the only one the author documented to be self-sustaining in the long run. This is because under this advising model, ANA leaders and personnel are more likely to take active ownership of its application than perceive themselves as passive recipients of training. The rapid expansion of self-sustaining models should be targeted as a priority of the first order if the U.S. mission to deny capture of AFG to global jihadist organizations is to succeed. The right prototype model exists and has been documented first-hand in the field; it needs only to be implemented and built further to render ever more robust.

Partner Leadership & Security Decision-Making: Improved security decision-making for cooperation and coordination among AFG leaders in government, the military and civilian population is a key line of effort to support the U.S.'s core military mission in AFG, while managing elections is not. A major driver of degradation in the conflict environment can be attributed to poor coordination/cooperation among organizations and dysfunctional leadership on security decision-making. Partly this is due to deep distrust among organizations, factions, and their respective leaders. But partly it is due to ineffective U.S. mitigation that should be built on far deeper knowledge and real understanding of the shifting sociocultural environment of leadership and its complex hidden codes of signaling, including how best to shape sociocultural and strategic conditions that generate effective security decision-outcomes in each instance.

Targeting - Mitigating Root Causes of the Conflict: The author's empirical studies in the field show there are two fundamental root causes of the conflict: (1) negative population perception of security and legitimacy; and (2) the evolving pathways of an unstable human ecosystem. The violent jihadist networks, civilian sanctuary, the weak governance, degraded ANSF capability, and increased intervention by geostrategic competitors such as Russia and Iran are all just downstream epiphenomena of the real and root causes. Taking root causes in order: (1) In the final analysis, all drivers lead back to a single nucleus of the problem: population perception of security. The population is far less concerned with efficient functioning of the national government than it is with the ANA's willingness and ability to impose social control, and to keep them secure from hostile rival groups, violent terrorist networks, power and criminal networks, and sundry armed militia. AFG populations groups have developed a heightened threat perceptual field for detecting the slightest fluctuation in ANSF signaling which is comprised of a complex set of properties. The most important of these is the intangible signal of a willingness to fight to defend the people within their historical communities. Interpretation of that signal by the population is, in essence, what creates the strategic effects on the ground. The slightest fluctuation in ANSF's resolve to defend the population from violent actors immediately drives communities to seek alternative security arrangements with armed groups who can demonstrate resolve. This is the genesis of the 'security-marketplace' identified by the author, which then makes it impossible to govern at the national level. The population creates the security-marketplace through demand for security organizations in order to fill the ANSF gap, and jihadist networks have the comparative advantage and a winning strategy from the community's standpoint in their promise to deliver three essential public goods: security, social order, and accessible justice. While violent networks fulfill their promise through brutal social control mechanisms, population groups are willing to accept this price for a social contract that brings them relative security in a high threat environment and thus greater chances of community survival. Neglect of the role of ANSF - population interactional signaling in driving terrorist safe havens in AFG has been a critical gap and blindspot in U.S./NATO advising and strategy. Until such time as an effective framework for a nationwide ANSF- local community security partnerships at the brigade and kandak levels and below are instituted, the security marketplace will remain wide open for terrorist networks to exploit to strategic advantage. ANSF's defense of AFG begins at the border of major population groups and their communities within each district. It is here the terrorist networks will win or lose the conflict. The U.S.'s overwhelming tactical capability can continue to eliminate terrorist nests and network leaders, but these same networks with new leaders will regenerate from a deep bench the very next day ad infinitum, and the war for U.S. national security in the region will continue inter-generationally. (2) U.S. strategy lacks the proper framework or capability to understand and

monitor evolving pathways of the unstable human ecosystem or intangible battlespace of the conflict in order to mitigate and shape those pathways strategically. As the author documents in previous SMA studies, the intangible battlespace which is the dominant strategic environment of the conflict, is shaped by at least three evolving pathways in the unstable human ecosystem: first, pathways of learning feedback loops or knowledge-generation pathways of each actor, which determine capability gains, strategic interest-formation and intent-formation; second, survival- and capability-optimization strategy or evolutionary fitness strategy of each actor relative to others in the human ecosystem that determines projection of actor dominance and robustness; and third, pathways of adaptation, innovation, evolutionary power-law capabilities (each a distinct trait) that determine which actors and networks can break out and evolve by multiple magnitudes to transform the region, trigger collapse, or achieve dominance and denial of access to competitors/adversaries. The actors, networks and organizations *in themselves* are less relevant to understanding and solving the conflict. What is critical is the dynamically changing pathways of strategic optimization and potentiation for each violent network actor/organization. Without such concepts, models and analytical tools to monitor and mitigate complex pathways by which each actor is dynamically evolving relative to others, the core U.S. mission has little chance for reaching successful completion.

Advanced Sociocultural Scientific Expertise & Support: - While the U.S. military has a range of sociocultural training programs within its components, some better than others, it lacks advanced, state-of-the-art knowledge and expertise to support the U.S.'s national security missions in complex human systems such as the AFG conflict. Acceptance of parallel inferiorities in other capability areas would be entirely unacceptable in the military, technological, scientific and professional sectors. Yet reliance on outdated concepts, methods and low-grade interdisciplinary social science and sociocultural support personnel—who lack the ability to develop and apply advanced conceptual innovations and methods in real time, or to design advanced training and reachback support that meets professional scientific standards—has become accepted as the status quo. The gap in creating an advanced infrastructure for state-of-the-art knowledge and application of sociocultural science, research and knowledge has guaranteed years of tactical success without accompanying strategic gains to show in the wars of this century. Allowing commercial contractors who attract low-grade human capital not active in the professional social scientific community and lacking scientific recognition for research and innovation in complex human systems, has been a corollary travesty—for it leads to false confidence in existing measures and capability while holding the U.S. military's sociocultural capabilities frozen in the 1970s. Ultimately, it is the Warfighter and front-line units who must deal with the negative effects on the ground of this low-grade capability, surrounded as they will continue to be in this century by complex human-system volatility on a level they are not equipped to effectively mitigate. Instead, the model which the U.S. should adopt with great haste in closing the sociocultural capability gap is one successfully developed in other scientific sectors, such as for human disease and health, biological sciences, bio-technology, space systems and technologies, information technology systems, computational sciences, software development, and so on. It involves creating and sustaining a research and scientific infrastructure across universities on collaborative platforms to innovate and apply state-of-the-art concepts, models and solutions to complex human-system volatility problem-sets, and to build advanced sociocultural reachback support. This best-practice, using advanced social scientific infrastructure and sociocultural reachback support for U.S. national security and international stability should be also undertaken to enhance partner engagement with leaders

in conflict environments at all levels. To date, leader engagement in conflicts has not benefited from advanced research and knowledge in the interdisciplinary social sciences.

Key Recommendations

- Limit the U.S. core mission in AFG to three core objectives:
 - Intensify counter-terrorism operations to degrade terrorist bases on both sides of the AF-PAK border
 - Conduct counter-terrorism operations to prevent violent jihadist networks from capturing the Afghan state thus creating a launch pad for global jihad
 - Accelerate ANA capabilities with more effective models (already demonstrated and documented) of advising targeted to essential war-fighting functions
- Leverage the indigenous environment to engage the 'natural state' instead of a western administrative state
- Leverage and empower AFG populations with indigenous governance rather than western administrative governance technologies in order to strengthen confidence and legitimacy, especially in the ANA.
- End the preoccupation with stabilization and 'corruption' which ignores the sociocultural context of the country by imposing a western model of social order that can never be attained
- Target advising to build and enhance the war-fighting capabilities of a strong Afghan National Army in the Indo-Eurasian tradition, using the most advanced documented model that supports the core mission.
- Strengthen key leader security-decision making across all sectors in AFG through deeper sociocultural knowledge to shape strategic conditions that generate effective security decision-outcomes.
- Target and Mitigate Root Causes of the Conflict through ANSF's engagement with the population to deny civilian sanctuary.
- Target and Mitigate Root Causes of the Conflict through advanced concepts, models and analytical tools for assessing evolving pathways of violent-network actor potentiation, optimization and interaction.
- Develop advanced collaborative scientific infrastructure across universities for sociocultural problem-solving and reachback support, using state-of-the-art research, innovation and application models and tools analogous to successful approaches demonstrated in other scientific and technological domains.

Comments on the US Approach to Afghanistan

Shireen Khan Burki, Ph.D.

First, with all due respect to the powers that be, what exactly is the strategic mission of the United States vis-a-vis Afghanistan? Judging from the current quagmire, there has never been a coherent policy based on a long term view or perspective. This is not an anomaly either as, I believe, our policy(ies) since the 1980s in Afghanistan (during the Soviet occupation) and Pakistan (under General Zia ul Haq et al) were poorly thought out, and rather short-sighted, which backfired on us.

Now to address this two pronged question, let's start with the "benefits" of our fifteen year "presence" in Afghanistan for the United States. There are none. Not for the people of the United States. The beneficiaries of American largesse have primarily been a certain segment of the Afghan populace (the elite and the warlords/drug mafia), and the Pakistani State (in the provision of massive U.S. "aid" to a "critical" ally in the so-called "War on Terror"). For the majority of Afghan people, the removal of a brutal and misogynistic regime (led by Mullah Mohammad Omar Hotaki) was a welcomed event. The influx of US monies has trickled down to the masses. Quality of life has improved in stark comparison to the Taliban years. However, circa 2017, there's an almost déjà vu sense of foreboding amongst Afghans across ethnic lines (Afghanistan's turbulent history seems cyclical which inevitably lends itself to hedging bets for the sake of survival) as they witness a NATO drawdown.

The original U.S. mission had a clear goal: to kill or capture the perpetrators of the 9/11 attack. Fair enough. Osama bin Laden is dead. Mullah Omar is too. Both, I might add, died in the bosom of Pakistan. Ayman al Zawahiri is likely comfortably ensconced and cared for there as well, though probably no longer in one of their cantonments. Although, given the chutzpah of the Pakistanis (especially the military), one shouldn't be surprised if he's still lurking fairly close to a military cantonment. Which begs the question: Who and where is the enemy?

Given the original mission circa 2001 (to kill or capture the mastermind/perpetrators of 9/11), we never gave Mullah Omar—who played no role in Al Qaeda's operation—a behind-the-scenes, face-saving way to hand over his Arab "guest(s)." Publicly cornered, Mullah Omar's nang/honor demanded he stand his ground and fulfill his obligation of nanawati (asylum) for OBL as much as he despised/distrusted OBL and his ilk. Had we handled this differently from the outset, the outcome would've been far more palatable than the one we face today.

Once the Taliban regime was overthrown, the United States should've declared fait accompli and departed from the region in 2004 once elections were held, and our perceived (by the Afghans, and eerily reminiscent of Imperial Britain's reviled Shah Shuja) puppet, Hamid Karzai, was installed. We failed to listen to Afghans from across the political and social spectrum at the Bonn Conference, when they clamored in one voice (a historic first) for the reinstatement of Muhammad Zahir Shah as Amir or King in a Constitutional Monarchy. A move which would've done so much on so many levels for a people recovering from decades of war and violence. It would have tamed the centrifugal forces, and been a nightmare for their nemesis across the Durand Line, which has worked hard to undermine Afghanistan's sovereignty with a deceptive "Strategic Depth" argument that rings hollow. Yes, I'm talking about Pakistan. And this trajectory began in the 1980s.

Current security conditions in Afghanistan continue to deteriorate. The Afghan National Army (ANA) is far from a cohesive force. There is resentment that the officer corps is dominated by non-Pashtuns. The Pashtuns have always prided themselves on being the “top dog” and don’t take kindly to playing second fiddle. Reliance on non-Pashtuns as foot soldiers, especially in the Kandaks deployed to Pashtun majority regions in the east and south has led to widespread resentment and distrust. Worse, it has contributed to the opposition “Taliban” recruitment efforts for the “insurgency.” The “Taliban” (a catch all phrase which includes warlords, drug mafia, adventurers, mercenaries etc.) have regained lost ground as the Afghan central “government” controls just over 50% of its so-called sovereign territory. That statistic alone should give room for pause vis-à-vis any critical cost-benefit analysis of a continued conventional U.S. military presence.

Which addresses the second question, basically, moving forward what should U.S. policy look like? First, strategically speaking, we have to accept that due to what has, in our foreign policy approaches, become an unfortunate norm of “mission creep” (with disastrous consequences), we’ve lost any face-saving way to exit Afghanistan gracefully. If it’s any consolation, we weren’t the first. The British Empire during its zenith was humiliated in two back to back Anglo Afghan Wars of 1839-1842 and 1878-1880 due to hubris and an overconfidence camouflaging incompetence. Not to mention the Soviet Union’s debacle based on a misreading (premature?) of unfolding events in Afghanistan and their own “domino theory” vis-à-vis an “Islamist” threat to their interests in neighboring satellite states. A familiar pattern. Superpowers seem to gravitate towards conquering Afghanistan starting with Alexander the Great and exhibit a degree of optimism in their ability to accomplish the mission that fails to consider a myriad of factors starting with the two most basic elements: the terrain and a xenophobic warrior populace.

The business of “nation building” is herculean in the best of circumstances. Afghanistan is essentially a fourth world state. Fourth. World. But with an overconfidence bordering on insanity, we --the United States-- thought in a few short years we could build a robust democratic Republic in a failed state run like it belonged in medieval times under the Taliban; with little or any infrastructure to speak of, let alone a cohesive populace. While one can admire such optimism it has, in my opinion, come at too high a cost, especially when we consider lives and limbs lost to what end?

The argument that if we pull out as the Soviets did, Afghanistan will become a safe haven for those who plot the next 9/11 rings hollow as the metastasized global threat from Muslim terrorists (muharribun) has plenty of sanctuaries for those who plot the next strike. Known and unknown. Some right under our own very noses in the West i.e., on our own home turf.

The Afghans have a right to be peeved at the US’s interventionist approach/response in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 given the facts. The problem has never been Afghanistan. The problem has been, and is, our “staunchest” ally Pakistan (and its benefactors). The country where Al Qaeda originated; where the Pakistani mastermind (Khalid Sheikh Muhammad) planned 9/11; where Osama bin Laden and Ayman al Zawahiri sought, and found, sanctuary after 9/11; and where the current Al Qaeda Emir --Zawahiri-- continues to find safe harbor.

Bottom line: For certain Afghans our presence has been a Godsend. We are a cash cow which bolsters an expanding endemic culture of corruption within limited circles at the expense of the larger populace. We need to take a cold hard look at how our continued “nation building” and military presence is beneficial to American interests (short and long term). Afghans will need to fix their own country. And we need to hold Pakistan accountable for providing a safe haven for

Al Qaeda and its ideologues; and for being the global ideological nexus of contemporary Islamic terrorism.

Comments on the US Approach to Afghanistan

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To begin, this question is highly problematic because of the amorphous and undefined character of many of its central terms. For example, what is the meaning of 'beneficial' here? To whom? In what sense? Likewise with 'dependency' – what does this mean and in what aspect? Militarily? Politically? Economically? Without a definition of terms, there is little value in seriously considering it as presently stated. Unfortunately, the question's lack of clarity and focus is a trait shared more generally with American policy in Afghanistan.

There are two overarching problems with the U.S. approach to Afghanistan at present. It must be acknowledged that these are not new, but have been present since early on in the American intervention in the country. The first and more important of the two is the absence of a clearly and consistently enunciated purpose or goal. What is the aim of American actions in Afghanistan? To defeat the Taliban? If so, to what end? To support the Afghan government? If so, why? To defeat IS in Afghanistan? If so, what would this look like and what would the repercussions be for the country itself?

The US lacks a convincing, publicly stated war aim in this conflict. To put it another way, it lacks strategic vision. Instead, its actions appear driven primarily by a combination of tactical necessity, inertia and sunk costs. Recent public statements by the political and military commanders charged with the effort, admitting the war is a 'stalemate', simply confirm this assessment. There is a desperate need for the US to answer for itself what its goals are in Afghanistan. Only once these are clearly laid out can it meaningfully answer the second order question of how best to pursue those goals.

The second central problem with the American approach to supporting Afghanistan is a lack of understanding of whom the US is fighting in the country, most importantly with regard to the Taliban. By this I do not mean that the US and its allies lack proficiency in identifying and targeting the group's structure. I have every confidence that the military can produce org charts of the Taliban's leadership. Rather, I mean that there is little to no meaningful understanding amongst American policy circles as to what the Taliban is as a political and social movement. Rather, for too long, the military has focused on the Taliban in particular, and Afghanistan more generally as a cultural problem, which has spawned a multitude of ineffective programs including the Human Terrain System and DARPA's so-called 'computational counter-insurgency' with Nexus 7. As a consequence, whatever tactical successes the US has enjoyed in the country – due primarily to its overwhelming technological and resources advantages – have been nullified by its lack of strategic vision. The Taliban does not present a cultural problem for the US military, but rather a political challenge for American policy-makers which they have proven unable or unwilling to confront.

What would it mean for policy-makers to engage and confront such a challenge? It would require an investment in understanding the Taliban and other hostile factions (including IS in Afghanistan) as political movements with specific political aims. The failure thus far to recognize these movements as legitimate political actors (though disruptive and in some cases detestable) has allowed them to steal the political space. The US has been too busy trying to on the one hand to culturally deconstruct them (too often as 'tribal') or on the other hand to dismiss and delegitimize them by calling them 'terrorists', 'Islamists' and 'insurgents'. Part of the problem here is that recognizing the political legitimacy of the Taliban movement threatens to question the legitimacy of American involvement in Afghanistan. The US has largely failed to engage with the issue of its own legitimacy in terms of public perception amongst the Afghan populace. This makes it vulnerable to Taliban propaganda that the US is an illegitimate foreign power/occupier. The many compromises the US has made with the Afghan government out of convenience, most notably its questionable role in presidential elections, has undermined its image amongst many. It has spent its political capital poorly, without realizing it has done so. The US needs to recognize the very real political costs of its actions and how those costs have limited its present options. Those options may only be fully exploited if the US fully recognizes and engages with its opponents as legitimate political actors.

If the US were to come to grips with the Taliban as a political and social movement, there are three realistic scenarios that could play out. Which of the three is pursued is dependent on an American calculus of whether or not its own political goals can co-exist with and be accomplished alongside those of Taliban, or whether they are mutually exclusive and existentially opposed. The first scenario would answer that calculus in the affirmative, namely that the US and Taliban's aims can co-exist, in which case the US and its Afghan allies could bring the Taliban into the political fold through negotiation. But for such negotiations to be successful, at minimum the US must clearly identify its own goals in Afghanistan, and thus aims in negotiations. The second scenario would find the Taliban are not a viable negotiating partner, yet pose such a threat to American aims in Afghanistan that they cannot be left alone. In this case, the Taliban would need to be eliminated through military force. This of course raises the question of the political will of the United States to do so, which is doubtful at present. The third scenario, which like the second considers the Taliban not a viable negotiating partner, would differ from the preceding one in that the US would decide its interests and aims in the country are not sufficient to justify the required military and political commitment of resources. In that instance, the US should simply withdraw.

With regard to a 'cycle of dependency', this is built upon a false premise and one which is rather insulting to the Afghans. The US has consistently pursued an unrealistic policy in the country which has sought to 'Afghanize' the conflict in the same way the US hoped 'Vietnamization' would allow for its exit from SE Asia in the early 1970s. As part of that policy, the US has burdened the Afghan government with an unsustainably large security force (near 300,000 including ANA and ANP personnel), which is well beyond the ability of the country to support. When it cannot support such a large security force, or indeed the reduced and questionably effective one it actually fields, the US turns around and blames the Afghans for being dependent. If there is a 'cycle of dependency', it is a consequence of American policy which was designed to engender it.

More pointedly, the idea of indigenizing the conflict so that Afghan security forces can assume the place of the US military, allowing the latter to leave, is not feasible as a long-term solution.

There is a long history of attempts by foreign powers to train and arm local forces in the region to act as their surrogates. This goes as far back as the early 19th century when the British East India Company trained soldiers of the Qajar (Iranian) shah so that they could resist Russian incursions (the Russians subsequently offered the shah's forces similar training to resist incursions of the East India Company and British). In Afghanistan itself, the British Raj likewise provided training and weapons to the Afghan army to serve as their regional surrogates. More than once, this army was turned on the forces of the Raj itself. The Soviets did the same with the forces of the PDPA, which fell in 1992. The US has its own history of training and arming local soldiers with generally poor results, most recently and publicly put on disastrous display with the collapse of the Iraqi army in the face of ISIS. If the aim of such train and equip programs is the long-term stability of Afghanistan, there is little past precedent which bodes well for its success. If instead the aim of such programs is simply to allow for the withdrawal of American forces, with little regard to the country's stability after that withdrawal, this could be a feasible (though morally questionable) exit strategy.

The US is presented with a question in Afghanistan which has fundamentally remained unanswered for the last fifteen years of war in the country. The question is what are American goals in the country and how do they relate to US national interests? The answer to that question will necessarily condition its choices moving forward, most importantly with regard to the resources – political, military and otherwise – the US is willing to dedicate to the pursuance and fulfillment of those goals. This does not seem a question for the US military to answer, but rather should more properly be addressed by the civilian policy establishment. As that establishment has failed to meaningfully do so over the last fifteen years, unfortunately the military has been tasked with fighting a war with no clear aims or purpose. Afghanistan is not, nor has it ever been a military problem. Rather it has always been, and remains a political one. Until that is recognized and addressed by American policy makers, the future will likely look very much like the past with regard to American involvement.

Comments on the US Approach to Afghanistan

Dr. Laura Jean Palmer-Moloney
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and

Dr. Alex Dehgan
Conservation X Labs

The current U.S. approach to supporting Afghanistan does not strategic, operational, or tactical awareness of nor attention to the critical role of water-food-energy nexus and specifically the role of water in the context of national security.

The stability and economic development of Afghanistan hinge on improved management of its water resources, given the dominance of agriculture in the Afghan economy, the relatively low fraction of arable land available, the poor condition of the country's water infrastructure, and the inadequate coordination and planning of water-related civil projects. Because Afghanistan's five major drainage basins extend beyond its borders and are a source of tension with its neighbors, transboundary water agreements would improve not only the outlook for

Afghanistan's long-term water security but regional stability. The Sistan Basin on the Iran/Afghanistan border, culturally linked and historically water insecure, has been the site, during times of water scarcity, of tensions ranging from diplomatic exchanges to violent skirmishes for at least the last century and a half. The perennial scarcity of water in the region is now aggravated by extensive and increasing consumption upstream. Water of the Helmand River is used for hydropower generation, irrigation, and human consumption in Kandahar and Helmand provinces before it ever reaches the Sistan. Helmand River water sharing is the most likely driver of a significant water dispute between Afghanistan and any of its neighbors, potentially destabilizing the region.

Comments on the US Approach to Afghanistan

Daniel Serwer

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We've been in Afghanistan far longer than U.S. interests there justify. We need to get out, without pulling the plug on the Afghan government. That is a delicate operation, but that should be our objective after the next Afghan election. We need to recognize that reducing the terrorist threat to zero in Afghanistan/Pakistan is a formula for eternal war.

Comments on the US Approach to Afghanistan

Vern Liebl

Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning

The current U.S. approach/strategy in regards to the government and security forces of Afghanistan is already hopelessly corrupted and detrimental. A simple reference to the U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) report of October 2016, presented to the U.S. Congress and the 34th in a series), stated "Corruption is an existential threat for the Afghan government, undermining its legitimacy." It included examples, such as illegal land grabs, infrastructure project kickbacks, police demand for bribes, etc. The report estimates that ~50% of approximately \$100 billion in aid provided to Afghanistan from the U.S. taxpayer between 2001 and 2014 has been siphoned off by corrupt practices. Specifically the Afghan Ministries of Interior, Justice and Public Works are notorious centers of corruption; which is materially aided by a lack of oversight by the U.S. and other donor nations. Again citing the report, there is a "direct link between funding corruption and erosion of security."

Fraudulent government practices disproportionately impact poorer Afghans, which from a geographic perspective means all of southern and most of eastern and northeastern Afghanistan, which are the precise areas Taliban resurgence has been seen. So in a binary equation, which is appropriate in the traditionally zero-sum environment which is Afghanistan, many local Afghans mistrust the Kabul government and all institutions stemming from it, such as the security forces (ANA, ANP, etc.), and generally prefer the Taliban, who are viewed as non-corrupt (ignoring the opium issue). This is clearly indicated by the shrinking areas of "government control" vice "contested" or "Taliban-controlled."

So, to answer the second sentence above, the current U.S. approach to supporting Afghanistan has already promoted a deleterious cycle of corrupt dependency and is clearly counter-productive to any legitimate activities not only in Afghanistan but in the larger region abroad (primarily flow of opium to Pakistan, Iran, Russia, etc). Before continuing, this analyst would also recommend the following December 2016 report submitted to the U.S. Congress, "Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan."

Just looking at the situation from a security perspective, responsibility for internal security is shared between the Afghan National Police (ANP), securing law and order, and the Afghan National Army (ANA), conducting offensive operations against internal enemies of the state. In practice, the roles of these groups are often blurred and intertwined, thus giving broad scope for corrupt practices. Many police officers (primarily AUP, ANCOP, AACCP, ABP and CNPA) compete for the top posts in volatile provinces like Helmand, not to fight insurgents but to get into the lucrative smuggling businesses. Cash-poor soldiers and police men have been selling ammunition and fuel to Taliban. ANA and ANP units in Helmand (and elsewhere) carry missing soldiers/police on the roles (ghost soldiers) in order to collect the excess pay. For such a poverty-stricken nation, Afghanistan is awash with corruptly diverted donor money and opium-derived money, which is creating some profound changes.

At the tactical and operational level, in many parts of Taliban-contested Afghanistan, many of the local civilians have stopped calling them Taliban or even Dushman (meaning "enemy", the name most non-Taliban controlled Afghans call them) but now refer to them as Mujahideen (from Arabic – meaning "those who are engaged in jihad"). This alone indicates a tectonic shift in potential local loyalties and tolerance for further government/security mismanagement; a strategically significant portion, size as yet unknown, of the populace is now pro-Taliban. From a purely U.S. military security view, the fact that a majority of the ANA and ANP losses in the 215th Corps and the 505 Police Zone are deserters, many keep their uniforms, IDs, bank cards and weapons, then join Taliban. So is 'green-on-blue' actually red-on-blue'?

In February 2017 the Kabul government admitted that it controlled only about 58% of the country, with Taliban controlling ~12% and the rest contested. In response, in April 2017 the Taliban issued a statement, amplified with graphics, that it controlled roughly 17% of Afghanistan and contested to lesser or greater degrees about 70% of the rest of it. Regardless, from the U.S. viewpoint, Afghan security forces (and therefore Afghan government officials) have essentially lost all of Helmand Province excepting the capital, Lashkar Gah. If Lashkar Gah falls, then the southern part of the Ring road is cut, western Afghanistan (and the 207th Corps as well as 606 ANP Zone) will essentially be cut-off from Kabul. Kandahar (and 205th Corps and 404 ANP Zone) become the new frontline against Taliban, ceding Nimroz and Farah Provinces with little struggle. Finally, the economic routes to the port of Chabahar in Iran falls under Taliban control while the roads to Karachi and especially Gwadar will be subject to potential interdiction.

Such an above scenario could see Taliban forces, now with relative security, mass forces and drive northeastward up the Ring Road, further enveloping and endangering the New Unity Government (NUG) in Kabul. Currently, given the amount of territory Taliban forces control, and that there are unacknowledged governance structures in place (although the U.S. and its western allies resolutely depict areas not under Kabul control as "ungoverned spaces") to not only "control" the local populace but to extract taxes, control economic enterprises such as

mining (see “The Taliban Stones Commission and the Insurgent Windfall from Illegal Mining,” CTC Sentinel, Vol 10, Iss 3, March 2017, <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/march-2017>) as well as control of the growing, harvesting processing and distribution of opium.

In essence, the Taliban has managed to re-establish itself again as at least a proto-Emirate. If the above factors (population and territorial control, combined with economic infrastructure and military presence) are accepted, it now becomes understandable why Russia and Iran have open relations with the Taliban and, if not recognized them, at least acknowledged them (mostly in an effort to get Taliban to limit the flow of opium into their respective countries), despite the anger of the U.S. Impending Taliban control of Central Asia links to Chabahar port also encourages Russian ties with Taliban in order to squeeze Chinese influence in the region. However, the NUG in Kabul seems to have also recognized the Taliban “statelet” as a current fact and have suggested recognizing a “Taliban Safe Zone”, and have conducted tentative exploratory talks with the Taliban.

Yet, within the seeming “bad tidings” there is opportunity. Recognizing that the U.S. lost its best and earliest opportunity to largely settle the Afghanistan “problem” and walk away by refusing to recognize a constitution monarchy out of the Bonn Conference in December 2001, when over 80% of all Afghans (including a majority of the Taliban survivors) were willing to accept the re-installation of King Zahir Shah (his grandson, Prince Muhammad Zahir Khan, is still awaiting the call), the U.S. must realize that decentralized and limited governance vice centralized governance is the potential solution. Additionally, if a comparison is drawn between the Taliban as similar in its “pretensions” to being a state with the Islamic State currently in Syria/Iraq, than the aperture for economic countermeasures is greatly widened.

Specifically, Taliban “diplomatic links” to Iran has angered many Taliban who view Iran as a Shia apostate entity which is hostile to themselves as Sunnis (despite some Iranian support to Taliban to combat the Kabul forces and the U.S. Coalition). Taliban “diplomatic links” to Russia (many Afghans, Taliban among them, refer to Russians as “sur Kaafar” or literally, “pig infidels”) has created extensive discontent within Taliban ranks as well. The historically close relationship with the Pakistan government (including the military and intelligence service) has weakened, with the Pakistan government occupied by combating the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), not a part of the Afghan Taliban (often referred to as the Quetta Shura faction) but trading on the name. Pakistan has also had a rapprochement with Russia, actually conducting joint Special Forces exercises in 2016, which is viewed as a betrayal by the Afghan Taliban. To add insult to injury, the engaging of negotiations with the NUG over a suggested safe zone, undercuts the long-standing Taliban pledge to destroy the “unbeliever government” in Kabul.

Atop the internal discontent bubbling away within Taliban, there are a few additional factors. First is the opium trafficking issue. With Taliban essentially taking control of a majority of that originating point (Helmand Province alone is the source of almost 80% of global opium growth, with Sangin District sourcing almost 47% of the global opium production), the Taliban “own” the opium issue. In trace with that ownership has come and will come even more corruption and most likely eventual betrayal of Taliban “ideals” (just examine the evolution of the FARC of Colombia). Another factor is the tribal dimension, which seems to be being ignored. Many of the Afghan Taliban are actually Kakar Ghurghusht (Pushtuns) from southwestern Pakistan, who are engaged in a struggle to displace the Alikozai (Alakozai, Alakozay) Durrani (Pushtuns) from Alikozai territory in Afghanistan. While the Alikozai stretch from Kandahar Province to Farah

Province, the great bulk live in the relatively fertile Helmand Province district of Sangin. If the Kakar succeed, the entire balance of tribal power in southern Afghanistan will be upset, making Pakistani efforts to dominate the region easier (which is driving India to provide anti-Taliban and anti-Pakistan support to some tribes in southern and southeastern Afghanistan, which is a low-level proxy conflict not within the purview of this question).

Complicating the situation in Afghanistan is the increasing infiltration of the Haqqani Group from bordering Pakistan into primarily Paktia Province (understandable as the Haqqanis are from the Zadran tribe, which spans the border), with signs there are also in Paktika, Ghazni and Nangarhar Provinces. The increasingly dire situation in southern Afghanistan has forced the Kabul government to reallocate scarce security resources to Helmand and Kandahar, thus opening the way in for Haqqani Group elements. In response, the Haqqani Group has provided some support to the Taliban via Uruzgan Province.

Al Qaeda (AQ) is still present in Afghanistan, providing in essence what we would call “contractor specialist” support to the Taliban (cyber, explosive, communication, etc). A unique situation as the current leader of AQ, Aiman al-Zawahiri, has sworn bay’at to the leader of the Taliban, Haibatullah Akhundzada (on a side note, he is a Noorzai and thus a tribal opponent of the Alikozai), as the Amir al-Mu’minin (Leader of the Faithful). Thus, in Afghanistan, AQ is nominally subordinate to Taliban. AQ is still trying to recover from the severe losses it suffered from U.S./Coalition forces from 2007-2014 but it is still an important supporting element for Taliban.

The Islamic State–Khorasan Province (ISKP) problem does not appear as dangerous, especially as most Afghans detest the extremely violent methods of the ISKP as well as the fact that most appear to be Pakistani and Uzbek (foreigners). Restricted mainly in western Nangarhar Province, they are being actively fought by local tribal militias, Afghan security forces, U.S./Coalition security forces and the Taliban, proving that a feared enemy can unite foes into temporary allies. However, with the rising level of discontent within the Taliban as well as its increasing propensity towards corruption, the ISKP, with its strict brand of “justice” and “incorruptibility” may become increasingly attractive to many younger Afghans who utterly hate the corruption and dysfunction of the Kabul government (blatant government corruption, weak governance, lawlessness, financial disparity, distrust of the legal and judicial system).

ISKP propaganda on education, especially religious education, is increasingly appealing to many Afghan Sunnis. And of course, the Pakistan efforts to destroy the TTP, which is Sunni in nature, appears to be an additional betrayal of Afghan Sunnis who fear the Iranian (and Pakistani) Shia. So, it is not surprising that what appears to be an ISKP tottering on the edge of destruction has managed to, possibly, see to an increasing number of anti-Shia attacks in western and central Afghanistan by what locals attribute to “takfiri Daesh”. ISKP operatives have also been noted, killed or captured in Uruzgan, Farah and Ghazni Provinces as well as in Pakistan Balochistan.

So, back to nugget the original question, “what significant change in military and/or other support” can be done? After looking at all the above, and honestly assessing to ourselves the criticality of Afghanistan as being worth U.S. blood and treasure expended, what can be done? History can help here. Afghanistan has traditionally not been a powerful unified state, and the few times it has been it has been via what we would call genocidal means. It is a frontier and a cross-roads, valuable as a place to transit, not to hold. The efforts to hold it have been made in

the past, and subjugation of the land has usually taken in excess of three to six generations of bloodshed (usually until the occupiers get distracted elsewhere and decamp). There is a reason Afghanistan is called the “Land of Yaghestan”, literally the land of rebels (the opposite would be hukumat, or government; Yaghestan carries connotations of both anarchy and freedom but lawlessness and violence as well).

Clearly, without a massive and long-term intervention with military power numbering in the hundreds of thousands, and most importantly, a secure logistical support infrastructure, the U.S. will not change much in Afghanistan. Yet, is it the mission of the U.S. to fundamentally change Afghanistan? The argument of “national security” does not justify the expense or effort, and in killing Afghans who in their own eyes are only seeking freedom from a tyrannical foreign occupier who is imposing a liberty-stealing centralized (in our eyes an efficient and humane) government, who has the moral high ground?

At best, in this analyst’s opinion, the “best” policy the U.S. could pursue in regards to minimizing the projection of terrorist actions from Afghanistan would be occasional punitive military actions and extensive political/diplomatic activity with surrounding countries to limit and contain such actions within Afghanistan. The current government and security forces might be supportable if it is acknowledged that control of most of the major urban areas, much of the significant food growing areas and selected transportation corridors between these areas are the “recognized” government. That means that acceptance of a Taliban statelet, while not officially recognized, could be accepted in much the same way the U.S. “deals” with places like Somaliland.

Clearly this may not be palatable to some and there are numerous variants (branches and sequels, in military language) that can be entertained. However, complete disengagement or complete and overwhelming intervention (conquest) are unacceptable, so, how much of the “grass” do we want to “mow” and how often?

Author Biographies



Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois

Dr. Allison Astorino-Courtois is Executive Vice President at NSI, Inc. She has also served as co-chair of a National Academy of Sciences study on Strategic Deterrence Military Capabilities in the 21st Century, and as a primary author on a study of the Defense and Protection of US Space Assets. Dr. Astorino-Courtois has served as technical lead on a variety of rapid turn-around, Joint Staff-directed Strategic Multi-layer Assessment (SMA) projects in support of US forces and Combatant Commands. These include assessments of key drivers of political, economic and social instability and areas of resilience in South Asia; development of a methodology for conducting provincial assessments for the ISAF Joint Command; production of a "rich contextual understanding" (RCU) to supplement intelligence reporting for the ISAF J2 and Commander; and projects for USSTRATCOM on deterrence assessment methods.

Previously, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a Senior Analyst at SAIC (2004-2007) where she served as a STRATCOM liaison to U.S. and international academic and business communities. Prior to SAIC, Dr. Astorino-Courtois was a tenured Associate Professor of International Relations at Texas A&M University in College Station, TX (1994-2003) where her research focused on the cognitive aspects of foreign policy decision making. She has received a number of academic grants and awards and has published articles in multiple peer-reviewed journals. She has also taught at Creighton University and as a visiting instructor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. Dr. Astorino-Courtois earned her Ph.D. in International Relations and MA in and Research Methods from New York University. Her BA is in political science from Boston College. Finally, Dr. Astorino-Courtois also has the distinction of having been awarded both a US Navy Meritorious Service Award and a US Army Commander's Award.

Shireen Khan Burki, Ph.D.

Born in New York City to a Pushtun father and an Irish mother, Burki grew up in Pakistan. After college in the U.S., she returned to Peshawar in 1987 and worked as a contractor for USAID on its Tribal Areas Development Program until February of 1989. Burki has an MA in Foreign Affairs (Middle East) from the University of Virginia, and a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Utah. She has worked with the United States Marine Corps as a Subject Matter Expert (South West Asia). Burki was an Assistant Professor of Conflict Management of Stabilization and Reconstruction at the National Defense University's College of International Security Affairs. From 2007 to 2012, she was a regular guest speaker at the popular "Perspectives on Islam and Islamic Radicalism" course at the Joint Forces Staff College.

Burki has published in various scholarly journals including *Middle Eastern Studies*, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, *Defense and Security Analysis*, *Contemporary Justice Review: Issues in Criminal, Social, and Restorative Justice*, *Journal of Applied Security Research* and *Comparative Strategy*; and has also published articles in *Strategy and Tactics* and *Modern War*. Burki is the author of *The Politics of State Intervention: Gender Politics in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran* (Lexington Press, 2013), and authored "The Politics of Zan from Amanullah to Karzai: Lessons for Improving Afghan Women's Status," in *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women* (University of California Press, 2011).



Dr. Benjamin D. Hopkins

Benjamin D. Hopkins is a specialist in modern South Asian history, in particular that of Afghanistan, as well as British imperialism. His research focuses on the role of the colonial state in creating the modern states inhabiting the region. His first book, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, examined the efforts of the British East India Company to construct an Afghan state in the early part of the nineteenth century and provides a corrective to the history of the so-called 'Great Game.' His second book, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, co-authored with anthropologist Magnus Marsden, pairs a complex historical narrative with rich ethnographic detail to conceptualize the Afghan frontier as a collection of discrete fragments which create continually evolving collage of meaning. He has additionally co-edited *Beyond Swat: History, Society and Economy along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier* with Magnus Marsden.

Professor Hopkins is currently working on a comparative history of frontiers across empires, using the history of the governance of the Afghanistan-Pakistan frontier as the central case study. The manuscript is provisionally entitled *The Imperial Frontier*. Outside of GW, his research has been funded by Trinity College, Cambridge, the Nuffield Foundation (UK), the British Academy, the American Institute of Iranian Studies, the Leverhulme Trust and the National University of Singapore. Professor Hopkins regularly teaches courses on South Asian history, the geopolitics of South and Central Asia, as well as World history.

During part of Professor Hopkins' sabbatical, he is a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Education Ph.D., University of Cambridge

Vern Liebl

Vern Liebl is an analyst currently sitting as the Middle East Desk Officer in the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL). Mr Liebl retired from the Marine Corps and has a background in intelligence, specifically focused on the Middle East and South Asia. Prior to joining CAOCL, Mr. Liebl worked with the Joint Improvised Explosives Device Defeat Organization as a Cultural SME, and before that with Booz Allen Hamilton as a Strategic Islamic Narrative Analyst. He has also published extensively on topics ranging from the Caliphate to Vichy French campaigns in WW2.

Mr. Liebl has a Bachelor's degree in political science from University of Oregon, a Master's degree in Islamic History from the University of Utah, and a second Master's degree in National Security and Strategic Studies from the Naval War College (where he graduated with "Highest Distinction" and focused on Islamic Economics).



Daniel Serwer

Professor Daniel Serwer (Ph.D., Princeton) directs the Conflict Management Program at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies. He is also a Senior Fellow at its Center for Transatlantic Relations and affiliated as a Scholar with the Middle East Institute. His current interests focus on the civilian instruments needed to protect U.S. national security as well as transition and state-building in the Middle East, North Africa and the Balkans. His *Righting the Balance: How You Can Help Protect America* was published in November 2013 by Potomac Books.

Formerly vice president for centers of peacebuilding innovation at the United States Institute of Peace, he led teams there working on rule of law, religion, economics, media, technology, security sector governance and gender. He was also vice president for peace and stability operations at USIP, where he led its peacebuilding work in Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan and the Balkans and served as Executive Director of the Hamilton/Baker Iraq Study Group. Serwer has worked on preventing interethnic and sectarian conflict in Iraq and has facilitated dialogue between Serbs and Albanians in the Balkans.

As a minister-counselor at the U.S. Department of State, Serwer directed the European office of intelligence and research and served as U.S. special envoy and coordinator for the Bosnian

Federation, mediating between Croats and Muslims and negotiating the first agreement reached at the Dayton peace talks. From 1990 to 1993, he was deputy chief of mission and chargé d'affaires at the U.S. Embassy in Rome, leading a major diplomatic mission through the end of the Cold War and the first Gulf War. Serwer holds a Ph.D. and M.A. from Princeton University, an M.S. from the University of Chicago, and a B.A. from Haverford College. He speaks Italian, French and Portuguese, as well as beginning Arabic. Serwer blogs at www.peacefare.net and tweets @DanielSerwer.

Dr. Laura Jean Palmer-Moloney

Dr. Laura Jean Palmer-Moloney is Founder, CEO, and Sr. systems consultant for Visual Teaching Technologies, LLC. She holds two Ph.D.s—one in Coastal Resources Management with a focus in wetlands ecology and hydrology from East Carolina University; the other in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus in Geographic Education from the College of Education, University of Denver. Dr. Palmer-Moloney specializes in scalable water-food-energy nexus issues. She is dedicated to working on the social justice aspects of climate change at the watershed scale.

Dr. Alex Dehgan

Dr. Alex Dehgan is the founder of a new startup, Conservation X Labs, and is a senior visiting fellow in the Office of the President at Duke University (effective April 1st, 2014) and will be focused on three major initiatives at the university – innovation and entrepreneurship, globalization, and the tropical biology initiative.

Dr. Alex Dehgan mostly recently served as the Chief Scientist at the U.S. Agency for International Development, with rank of Assistant Administrator, and founded and headed the Office of Science and Technology. As the Agency's first chief scientist in two decades, Dr. Dehgan implemented the President's promise to restore science and technology to its rightful place within USAID. During his tenure at USAID, Alex has been the architect of a number of new Agency institutions, including the position of the chief scientist, the independent office of science and technology, the position of the Agency geographer, and the GeoCenter. Alex built the Office of Science and Technology from scratch to an 80 person office, and \$100 M dollar research program, in less than four years, and leveraged or raised \$500 million dollars, including a \$200 M dollar commitment from the Swedish government to his office. In 2014, this program received congressional approval to become the new USAID Development Lab.

Prior to coming to USAID, Dr. Dehgan worked in multiple positions within the Office of the Secretary at the Department of State and the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs where he developed a science diplomacy strategy towards addressing our most challenging foreign policy issues in Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and the greater Islamic world. Dr. Alex Dehgan was the founding Afghanistan Country Director for the Wildlife Conservation Society's Afghanistan Biodiversity Conservation Program. Through his leadership, WCS led efforts to create Afghanistan's first national park, conducted the first comprehensive biological surveys of the country in 30 years, helped develop Afghanistan's biodiversity conservation laws and policies, and curtailed illegal wildlife trade on US and ISAF military bases. Dr. Dehgan holds a Ph.D and M.Sc. from The University of Chicago's Committee on Evolutionary Biology, where he focused on extinction and adaptation of 12 lemur species during environmental change in tropical forests in Madagascar. He also holds a J.D. from the University of California, Hastings, and a B.S. from Duke University. He was chosen as an "Icon of Science" by *Seed Magazine* in 2005, received the World Technology Award for Policy in 2011, and has been recognized through multiple awards

from the Departments of State and Defense, and the US Agency for International Development. In 2013, AAAS selected Alex as one of its 40@40 fellows out of 2,600 AAAS Science Policy Fellows globally for its 40th Anniversary based on individuals who have made exemplary dedication to applying science to serve society, were creative, innovative, and collaborative problem solvers in addressing global challenges, and were uncommon ambassadors for the role of science and technology.

Dr. Spencer B. Meredith III, PhD

Dr. Spencer B. Meredith III, PhD, is an Associate Professor in the Joint Special Operations Master of Arts program for the College of International Security Affairs at the National Defense University. After completing his doctorate in Government and Foreign Affairs at the University of Virginia in 2003, he served as a Fulbright Scholar in the Caucasus in 2007 working on conflict resolution, and has focused on related issues in Eastern Ukraine for several years. He has also served as a subject matter expert for several DOS public diplomacy programs in South and East Asia dealing with the role of religion and democracy in US foreign policy.

His areas of expertise include democratization and conflict resolution in Russian, Eastern European and Middle Eastern politics. Most recently, he has been working with USASOC on several projects related to comprehensive deterrence, narratives and resistance typologies, and non-violent UW in the Gray Zone. His publications include research on democratic development and international nuclear safety agreements (*Nuclear Energy and International Cooperation: Closing the World's Most Dangerous Reactors*), as well as articles in scholarly journals ranging from *Communist Studies and Transition Politics*, *Peace and Conflict Studies*, to *Central European Political Science Review*. He has also published in professional journals related to UW, SOF more broadly, and the future operating environment, with articles in *InterAgency Journal*, *Special Warfare*, *Foreign Policy Journal*, and the peer-reviewed *Special Operations Journal*. He is currently participating in SOCOM SMAs on Intellectual Motivators of Insurgency and a Russian ICONS simulation.



Dr. Shalini Venturelli

Dr. Shalini Venturelli is Associate Professor of International Communication and International Relations, in the School of International Service, American University, Washington, DC. She conducts international sociocultural field research and multidisciplinary complex analysis of human systems and information environments of conflict regions, including: sociocultural drivers of instability and international security, and asymmetric information capabilities of strategic competitors. She investigates, regional stability systems, ideology & influence production, population and social order control-mechanisms, enhancement of partner security capabilities, strategic communication, evolutionary capabilities of violent extremist networks, social unrest and global social media networks, and assessments of governance, security and stabilization in volatile world regions.

Current projects include:

- Sociocultural analysis support to the Warfighter in conflict regions.
- Evolutionary capabilities and strategic impacts of violent terrorist networks, including ISIL, Al

- Qaeda and their affiliates within and across strategic regions.
- Design and application of evolutionary models of information dynamics to identify and predict unstable human ecosystems in trans-regional environments.
 - Identification of critical drivers of human ecosystem volatility across diverse security and information orders aimed at advancing capabilities in detection, deterrence and information engagement.
 - Control systems mechanisms of asymmetric information and influence capabilities of geopolitical power actors Russia, China, Iran and their non-state proxies across transregional land and maritime domains in MENA, Southwest Asia, Euro-Asia and East Asia.

Prof. Venturelli was awarded the U.S. Army Commander's Medal for Civilian Service for her front-line research support to U.S. forces in Southwest Asia and the Middle East with field investigation and analysis of the strategic information environment and sociocultural drivers of conflict. She is also a recipient of the Secretary of Defense Medal for the Global War on Terrorism for her efforts in support of the Warfighter's mission through enhanced awareness of complex human environments.

Dr. Venturelli has multidisciplinary-multiregional expertise, and is multilingual She is the author of numerous studies, publications and reports on information and communication environments, information networks, the global communication and knowledge revolution, and culture, media and international security. Professor Venturelli received a Ph.D. from the University of Colorado at Boulder in International Communication & International Relations, an M.A. from the University of Chicago in Interdisciplinary Social Science, and a B.S. from Illinois State University in Economics. She conducts graduate seminars, courses and leadership training in intercultural and cross-cultural communication, culture and international security, sociocultural field research in conflict zones, strategic communication in war and peace, among other programs. Contact: sventur@american.edu