

Reconstruction or Containment

Perceptions of Conflict, Control and Economy in Afghanistan Five Years On

ADELE M.E. JONES

In July 2006 General David Richards, the most senior British military commander and departing head of NATO in Afghanistan referred to the country as a state of near anarchy¹ and increasingly Afghanistan-watchers withdraw the title of post-conflict Afghanistan as the country sinks further into patterns of conflict which have nagged it for decades.²

By 2007, the Afghanistan Compact which the Afghan government signed onto in 2006 and in which over 60 nations and international institutions promised to provide the necessary resources and support for achieving a 'shared vision of the future' for a 'stable and prosperous Afghanistan', is seen to have had little impact. The assumption of relative stability upon which the Compact was premised has been undercut by the insurgency in the south and east, diverting time and resources.³

At the same time as anarchy was being publicly attributed to the country by NATO, at least three organisations, funded or based in the US, conducted follow-up surveys of attitudes of Afghan people regarding the direction in which the country has been moving. The moderate but still positive results of each report published in October and November 2006 contrast sharply with reports of starvation and death as the country again faces devastation from drought. In the words of one farmer in a village where 50 children have

¹ *The Guardian*, 21 July 2006.

² International Crisis Group, *Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency: No quick fixes*. Asia Report No. 123. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2006.

³ International Crisis Group, *Afghanistan's Endangered Compact*. Asia Briefing No. 59. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007.

died this year, “the world does not know that people in Afghanistan are only thinking about what they can eat, not about fighting.”⁴

This paper summarises surveys conducted amongst Afghan people by three organisations in 2005–2006. It then gives an overview of the nature of conflict and reconstruction in Afghanistan, with a final section looking at the type and nature of conflict in the northern province of Badakhshan. This includes personal observations and findings from research conducted by the organisation for whom the author worked from 2004–2006.

People’s perceptions 2005 – 2006

In 2006 three organisations conducted surveys with Afghan people. All had carried out earlier surveys in Afghanistan. While the surveying organisations have explained their methodology in some detail⁵ and given precise error margins, readers need to keep in mind issues concerning social desirability of responses, more so because interviewers are obviously seen to be allied in some way or other with aid givers. While multiple surveys provide rich data for further analysis, it is beyond the limits of this paper to do more than compare key results of 2005 and 2006 surveys.

The Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) conducted interviews with 1,609 people in 2005 and 1000 in 2006.⁶ The Asia Foundation commissioned a survey in 2006 with 6226 people,⁷ building on earlier surveys conducted in 2003 and 2004.⁸ Gallup Poll surveyed 1,196 people in 2006 and 2,089 in 2005.⁹ In all cases, research was done across the country in all provinces unless hindered by security concerns.

⁴ BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/south-asia>, 22 Nov. 2006.

⁵ Jodice, D., *On the Frontiers of Survey Research: Methodological Issues Involved in Opinion Polling in Afghanistan*. Paper presented at 57th Annual WAPOR Conference, Phoenix, Arizona, 2004.

⁶ Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *Voices of a New Afghanistan*. Washington DC: CSIS, Post Conflict Reconstruction Project, 2005; Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *Voices of a New Afghanistan*. Washington DC: CSIS, Post Conflict Reconstruction Project, 2006.

⁷ The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2006*. Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2006.

⁸ The Asia Foundation, *Democracy in Afghanistan 2004: A Survey of the Afghanistan Electorate*. Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2004.

⁹ Gallup Poll, *World Public Opinion: Poll of Afghanistan*. Princeton, NJ: Gallup Poll, December 2005.

Quantitative opinion polls

Gallup Poll results for the 2005 survey concluded that Afghanistan was moving in the right direction (83 percent). Living conditions were seen as better than in late 2001 (85 percent). In 2006, 87 percent believed things were better, though 65 percent in the south of the country said that things were worse and only 16 percent there thought things were better. Polls in both 2005 and 2006 showed significant regional differences on the security issue, with an overall decreased satisfaction in this domain. Whereas 70 percent of those surveyed in 2005 rated security in their region as excellent/good, in 2006 the overall figure had dropped to 53 percent, with a low 25 percent satisfaction in the south. While 47 percent of those surveyed in the south in 2005 were concerned with poor or weak security, the number had risen to 68 percent in the 2006 survey.

In 2005, the Taliban were identified as the biggest danger to Afghanistan (41 percent), then drug traffickers (28 percent), local commanders (22 percent) and the United States (4 percent). Likewise the central government came out fairly well in 2005 with 91 percent approval rating. While President Karzai was considered very favourably by 68 percent in 2005, local leaders were also considered very effective by 21 percent of respondents but international agencies very effective by only 38 percent. The upsurge of violence and intense fighting between NATO forces and insurgents when the southern survey was conducted in June–August 2006 obviously affected results. However, according to Gallup Poll, Afghans regardless of religious beliefs and ethnicity (71 percent satisfaction among the Sunnis surveyed and 95 percent of the Shia) are still rather positive that Afghanistan is ‘headed in the right direction’. However, a final warning note in the Gallup Poll report again quotes the former commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan saying that the country is at ‘tipping point’ and that without security improvements, many Afghans could decide to support the Taliban.¹⁰

The Asia Foundation 2006 survey conducted with 6,226 people also has respondents agreeing that better security has the country going in the right direction,¹¹ though while 75 percent in the Gallup Poll survey say that things are better than under the Taliban, this survey has only a modest 54 percent responding that Afghanistan is more prosperous today than under the Taliban¹²

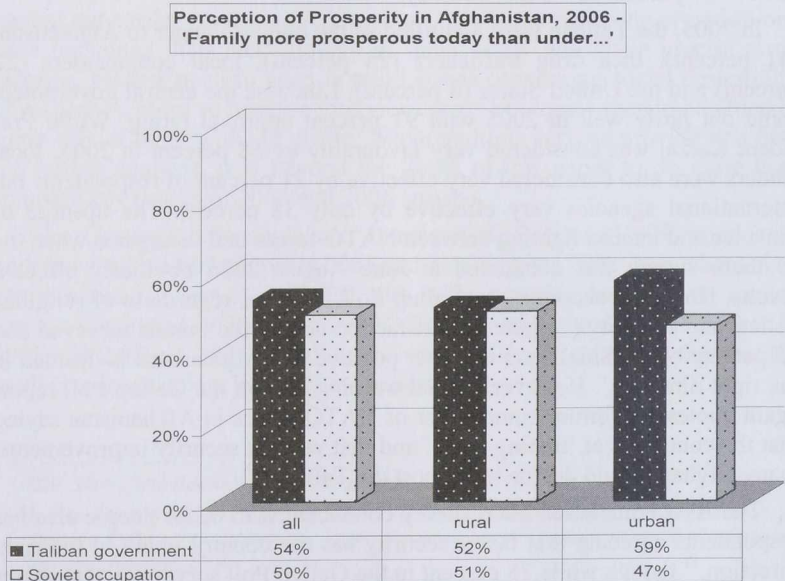
¹⁰ Gallup Poll, *In Afghanistan, Views of Security Differ Starkly by Region*. Princeton, NJ: Gallup Poll, October 2006, <http://www.galluppoll.com>.

¹¹ The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2006*. Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2006, p. 16

¹² op. cit., p. 18

– 52 percent in rural areas and 59 percent in urban areas, which indicates that current economic development and benefits in rural areas remain weaker than in urban areas. Perhaps more significantly, only 50 percent believe that the economy of Afghanistan today is more prosperous than under Soviet Occupation¹³ (51 percent rural and 47 percent urban). This conclusion is shocking five years into the ‘reconstruction’ period considering decades of war funded by foreign countries to the tune of billions of dollars, people killed and displaced on a massive scale, ruined economy, and a land which still has an estimated 10 million land mines to haunt Afghanistan in the twenty-first century.

Figure 1: Perception of Prosperity in Afghanistan, 2006



Source: See Fig. 3.10 in: The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of Afghan People: Afghanistan 2006*, p. 24.

¹³ op. cit., p. 24

While nationally, security is identified as the greatest problem facing the country in 2006, unemployment¹⁴ and poor economy together are identified as the more significant problem overall. Examining local level results however, unemployment, poverty and poor economy is by far the greatest problem cited, though taken together, lack of infrastructure and services such as electricity, safe drinking water, health care, and roads (especially in the north) are also of serious concern.¹⁵

Corruption is identified in two of the studies as a serious problem.¹⁶ 77 percent of the respondents interviewed in the Asia Foundation survey noted corruption as a major problem in Afghanistan, with 66 percent indicating serious corruption in provincial governments. This finding is supported by the CSIS evaluation study where corruption and nepotism in government is seen as on the increase, thus undermining the state's capacity to meet people's needs in the long-term. This finding is even more significant when one compares it with responses on democracy.

The Asia Foundation respondents were asked both, what democracy means to them¹⁷ (with interesting comparisons in Table 2 below, between results on the same topic from the 2004 and 2006 surveys) and what democracy could bring to them personally. While freedom, peace and rights¹⁸ and law remain high on both Asia Foundation surveys,¹⁹ it is interesting to note that in terms of what democracy means, Islamic democracy has increased from 8 percent in 2004 to 23 percent in 2006.²⁰ For the question 'what is the most important thing that democracy will bring you personally' 31 percent have identified Islamic democracy as a personal benefit of democracy in 2006. Though it is not clear from the survey what respondents understood by this term since it was an open-ended, multiple-response question, one could still ask whether there is more sympathy for and greater expectations that a religious/Islamic democracy/government will do for them what the current government is failing to do and failing to provide.

¹⁴ op. cit., p. 96

¹⁵ op. cit., pp. 11–14.

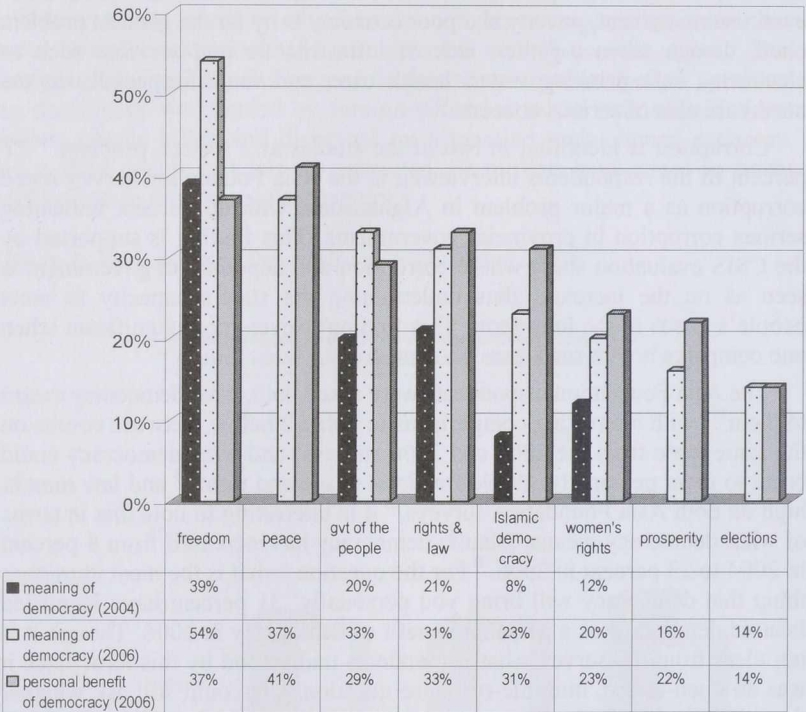
¹⁶ op. cit., p. 96

¹⁷ op. cit., pp. 37–38.

¹⁸ op. cit., p. 102

¹⁹ The Asia Foundation, *Democracy in Afghanistan 2004: A Survey of the Afghanistan Electorate*. Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2004, p. 11

²⁰ op. cit., p. 37.

Figure 2: Perceptions of Democracy in Afghanistan, 2004 – 2006

Source: Compiled from: The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of Afghan People: Afghanistan 2006*, Figs. 5.1, 5.2, pp. 37–38 and data from The Asia Foundation, *Democracy in Afghanistan 2004*, pp. 55–60.

For policy makers and the donor community this should ring alarm bells, as interpretations of what is meant by Islamic democracy differ widely. However, while it is beyond the scope of this paper to open the broad discussion of what is meant or what might be understood by Islamic democracy, a useful explanation from Anwar Ibrahim,²¹ former Deputy Malaysian Prime Minister is included here for consideration.

²¹ Ibrahim, A., 'Universal Values and Muslim Democracy'. *Journal of Democracy*, 17, 3 (2006), pp. 5–12.

Harrowing theories have also been concocted claiming an inherent contradiction between Islam and democratic values ... It is said, for example, that whereas liberal democracy places sovereignty in the hands of the individual, in Islam sovereignty belongs solely to God, thereby reducing the individual to a mere agent with little concern for the exercise of creativity and personal freedom.... The proper view is that freedom is the fundamental objective of the divine law. Islam has always expressed the primacy of 'adl or justice ... which emphasizes consultation and condemns despotism and tyranny.

What is clear from the Asia Foundation survey is that 82 percent agree that political leaders should make decisions about how the government is run²² and that religious leaders should lead people in obeying obligations of their faith. While 61 percent state that religious leaders should be consulted in decision-making processes, 37 percent believe that religion and politics do not mix.²³

Qualitative interviews

2005 and 2006 interviews from the Centre for Strategic and International Studies focused on security, governance, justice, social well-being and economic opportunity. November 2006 results of the latest study show that the state-building mission has lost ground and has slipped further into the 'danger zone'.

Again, security shows the most dramatic decline, borderline on the danger, risk and viable zones. Governance has actually moved into the danger zone in 2006, with main problem areas noted as warlords, and corruption/nepotism within the government. The justice sector which was the worst-performing sector in 2005 has slid even further as Afghans show they are extremely disenchanted with the justice system (or lack of it).

Economic security changed little in the last year according to the CSIS studies but remains a risk area as the Asia Foundation report has also shown.²⁴ While the CSIS social well-being indicator shows that those surveyed consider their needs are being met more effectively than last year, the question of sustainability of services continues to be a problem. Considering that health clinics and more than 350 schools closed in 2006 because of

²² The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2006*. Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2006, p. 40

²³ op. cit., pp. 37–42.

²⁴ op. cit., pp. 11–15, 19, 24

threats and attacks, this result needs to be weighed carefully, especially with the news that polio increased six-fold in 2006 due to lack of health facilities in rural areas. As the report pinpoints, Afghan people's expectations have not been met and they are looking for a change which matches the level of resources which have come into the country, a point we return to later in this paper.

Structural and economic factors in reconstruction

The following section examines in more detail, aspects which were included in the surveys and discussed in the first part of this paper – all factors which determine one way or the other the direction of reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan – efforts which either contain the conflict (emergency management) or build a lasting way forward.

Insurgency

In contrast to what is often claimed, research and intelligence reports state that only 20 percent of violence is from ideologically based Taliban. Their numbers are augmented by recruits who have lost faith in the government, by local leaders, and by international presence, all part of the power game for their own ends.²⁵ In fact, a new development in November 2006 which has received a mixed response in the Afghan community sees President Karzai offering to hold talks with Mullah Omar the Taliban leader, and Gulbuddin Hekmatyar the notorious warlord heading the 30 year old mujahideen faction, Hezb-e-Islami²⁶ (which derives most of its income from heroin), who has also been labelled a terrorist by the US and alleged by many to be a war criminal.²⁷

Having said this, there has clearly been misanalysis by US/British government/media speaking of defeated Taliban forces. They have regrouped into battalions with leaders showing a sophisticated grasp of guerrilla warfare. A new level of conflict has been reached with tactics such as 50 suicide bombings in 2006, increased VBIEDs/IEDs²⁸, and targeting 'soft targets'

²⁵ International Crisis Group, *Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency*. Asia Report 123. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2006

²⁶ BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/south-asia>, 8 Nov. 2006.

²⁷ BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/south-asia>, 9 Nov. 2006

²⁸ Vehicle-Borne Incendiary Explosive Device

including burning of 202 schools (April–July 2006), 41 school staff/students killed in six months, and attacks on NGO/government staff. By November 2006 more than 4000 people have been killed, compared with 1,600 in 2005, doubling that of 2004.

Strongest insurgent activity in Afghanistan is in southern and eastern provinces, largely Pashtun areas. However, conflict cannot be described as ethnic. At present, Afghanistan sees none of the ethnic violence experienced after the fall of the Najibullah government in 1992, with Pashtun-speaking Kuchis co-opted by Taliban in Bamyān, Hazara/Sayyid conflict over internal power control in Hazarajat,²⁹ and violent anti-Pashtun retribution in Herat and Kunduz. Tajik/Panshiri dominance of the interim government by Northern Alliance commanders has been tempered by the 2005 elections, important in addressing Pushtun resentment.³⁰ Shia/Sunni religious conflicts have not taken on the same dimensions as in Iraq or Pakistan.

From a holistic position, problems with insurgency really cannot be discussed without looking at ‘state bodies’ in Afghanistan. The Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board (made up of Afghan ministers and major international players) which oversees the Afghanistan Compact issued a relatively robust first public report in November 2006, emphasising among other things the need to reform the Interior Ministry. Afghanistan has also been described as having one of the most centralized administrations in the world.³¹ However, the continuing absence of a functioning judiciary or official conflict resolution mechanisms allows anti-government elements or local power holders to use conflict to their own advantage. While the Afghan National Army is multi-ethnic and generally regarded well though under-financed and under-resourced, police are seen as little more than private militias, corrupt, and part of the security problem rather than a solution. The new rapid deployment of an additional 11,000 police with ten days training for high risk districts at the end of 2006 has raised the ongoing concern of regularization of militias. This problem is captured clearly in a recent ICG report which critiques the spiralling violence which has ‘exacerbated tendencies among the government and its international backers to favour short-sighted, quick fixes such as auxiliary police, which risk being little more than poorly

²⁹ Sarabi, H., *Politics and Modern History of Hazara: Sectarian Politics in Afghanistan. MA Law and Diplomacy Thesis*, Tufts University, 2005, <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/resreach/2006/Sarabi>.

³⁰ International Crisis Group, *The Problem of Pushtun Alienation*. Asia Report No. 62. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2003.

³¹ Lister, S./Nixon, H., *Provincial Governance Structures: From Confusion to Vision*. Kabul: AREU, 2006.

trained militias, and to work around, not through, the new democratic institutions.³²

Economy

The position of warlords/local commanders are part of the structural problems facing Afghanistan. They are integrally involved in the direction in which the economy is advancing, especially in the drug trade. If we talk of a policy of containment, i.e., controlling, containing and in time quelling insurgency, then we see warlords and commanders co-opted by both government and US/NATO forces as allies which means warlords continue to derive power and authority from local conflicts. The Disarmament, Demobilisation, Reintegration (DDR) campaign has been counterbalanced by rearmament of private militias working on behalf of US and NATO troops, in turn having the potential to explode and to be used in anti-government insurgency.

Representatives of each government since December 2001 have included ex-commanders and warlords. Even the present elected government has an uneasy array of members, many of whom led armies and militias fighting opposing armies of other members. It is not clear how this amalgamation will work for the benefit of Afghan people, probably the reason that surveys quoted earlier are rather dismissive of government members who increasingly are called corrupt. A recent report has again captured the problem:

The glaring downside of the new body is the presence of warlords, drug dealers and human rights violators – many of whom continue their abuses with impunity. The deputy head of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Body ... has estimated that more than 80 percent of the members from provinces and more than 60 percent from Kabul have links to armed groups.³³

On top of this, it is clear that Afghanistan has a narco-economy, with predictions having it produce 92 percent of the total world opium production for 2006 (an estimated 59 percent increase on 2005), the highest production level ever recorded in Afghanistan. Revenue gained from opium this year will be over USD 3 billion. Legal production of poppy for morphine seems unfeasible for many reasons, not least because opium for medical

³² International Crisis Group, *Afghanistan's Endangered Compact*. Asia Briefing No. 59. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007.

³³ International Crisis Group, *Afghanistan's New Legislature: Making Democracy Work*. Asia Report No. 116. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2006, p. 6.

purposes sells for USD 20–30 a kilo, while illicit Afghan opium sells for USD 100–120 per kilo.³⁴ The quantity produced in 2006 is equivalent to five years of the global morphine demand. An interesting point here is that Afghans do not see growing or producing opium as the problem but only the trafficking which involves commanders and militias. This has been repeated constantly, including in the research in Badakhshan, discussed in the next section. The writer found the same thing in NWFP twenty years ago when the Governor of the province stated publicly in South Waziristan that ‘heroin is our mineral ... our oldest crop and mainstay of our agriculture ... I maintain that Islam has not forbidden opium cultivation. The arbitrary ban on its cultivation has resulted from American pressure.’³⁵

The other source of finance in Afghanistan is international aid, little of which is in the hands of the Afghan government itself. Of USD 82.5 billion spent over five years, most was for military operations. Of the USD 7.3 billion for reconstruction, most went on salaries for Afghan national forces and counter-narcotics operations.³⁶

Even exploration and development of a mine in what is claimed to be the world’s largest copper reserve (Ainak) and which the World Bank indicates could capture as much as 2 percent of the annual world market, will only generate USD 200 million for the government annually.³⁷ Even with job opportunities for 3,000 Afghans, it comes a poor second to the revenue gained from opium production this year.

International players

Finally, it is not only agreements and compacts which involve international players in Afghanistan’s future. Any discussion of international involvement in the country’s reconstruction and development must be seen as far more complex and multi-dimensional. Afghanistan is vulnerable to the designs of neighbouring states as well as to the structural instability of great power

³⁴ UNODC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006*. Kabul: UN Office on Drugs and Crime, 2006

³⁵ Yusufzai, A.S., ‘Khyber crackdown’. *The Herald*, Karachi January 1986, p. 59–60, quoted in A.M.E. Jones, *Educational Planning in a Frontier Zone: Dependence, Domination and Legitimacy*. Aldershot: Avebury, 1993, p. 62.

³⁶ Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *Voices of a New Afghanistan*. Washington DC: CSIS, 2006, p. 3.

³⁷ Afghanistan Watch, *Nine companies bid for copper exploration rights*. <http://thecenturyfoundation.typepad.com/aw/2006/11/9-companies.bid.html>.

relations in the wider Central Asian area to which it belongs.³⁸ The complex scenario of international players in Afghanistan includes Pakistan with its 'fluid alliances of convenience'. Pakistan has been accused of tacit complicity with insurgency,³⁹ gaining both international support as an ally on war against terror while providing sanctuary to Taliban leaders or accommodating extremist political parties in support of Taliban,⁴⁰ and with madrasas training and dispatching *jihadi* fighters to Afghanistan⁴¹ – none of this helped by the fact that the intentions of India, the largest regional donor to Afghanistan, is viewed with suspicion by Pakistan. Even in more mundane matters, Afghanistan serves as a way for Pakistani traders to avoid taxes on goods imported from the Gulf. Goods bought, sold and smuggled carried across the borders to be resold again means lucrative income for traders – part of the ancient trade route and life of the region.

The involvement of international players includes decision making done in capitals of contributing nations on political grounds – as much now as thirty years ago during a 'colder' war. It includes the growing propaganda about foreign, inappropriate responses and tactics used by military – US and NATO, with increasing numbers of civilians killed as NATO finds itself in the middle of ground battles. All of this against a reaction in 2005 from Russia, China and four Central Asian States, all members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, with a formal communiqué calling for the United States to set a timeline for withdrawing from military bases in Central Asia, suggesting that there was a declining need for combat operations against the Taliban.⁴²

³⁸ Swanström, N./Cornell, S., *Strategic Conflict Analysis of Afghanistan*. Report for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Uppsala: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2005, p. 8.

³⁹ International Crisis Group, *Discord in Pakistan's Northern Areas*. Asia Report No. 131. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007.

⁴⁰ 'The Issue of Pak-Afghan Cooperation'. *Daily Outlook Afghanistan*, 20 May 2006.

⁴¹ International Crisis Group, *Pakistan: Karachi's Madrasas and Violent Extremism*. Asia Report No. 130. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007.

⁴² Suhrke, A., *The Limits of State Building: The Role of International Assistance in Afghanistan*. Paper presented at the International Studies Association, San Diego, March 2006, p. 26

Badakhshan Province as an example

The Asia Foundation survey speaks in terms of the ‘national mood’,⁴³ showing results from different parts of Afghanistan. The final section of this paper gives some examples of conflict arenas discussed above, with respect to Badakhshan, a region in which the author was involved from 2004–06. In each case, one sees that the issues are about power and control of resources. Observing Badakhshan is also interesting in so far as it shows that conflict problems are not the domain of southern Afghanistan. While international media highlights security problems of the south and east, implying that the north where German troops operate is relatively secure, the situation has rapidly deteriorated. Badakhshan is one of the five top opium growing areas in Afghanistan, with the 2006 production a 77 percent increase on 2005. The last two years have seen NGOs attacked numerous times, schools burned down, and the drug trade increase. As recently as October 2006, a high school in Zebok District in Badakhshan was torched, the same area where a commander stopped Taliban entering the district along Pakistan border in 2000.

Other conflicts observed have been over resources, religious issues (28 percent of the 725,000 in Badakhshan are Ismaili, the rest Sunni Muslims and some Shia), and border conflicts near Tajikistan. In all cases, conflicts seem greater in areas controlled by commanders.

In 2003–2004 a large international organisation working in Badakhshan⁴⁴ participated in a research project focusing on provincial conflict,⁴⁵ using a Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment⁴⁶ (PCIA) approach. The most serious conflicts observed were connected with power struggles between rival warlords, and between commanders and religious leaders in connection with drug trafficking or natural resources. While there are other causes of conflict in Badakhshan, three have been selected for consideration here, potentially focal areas for economic development and state apparatus building.

⁴³ The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2006*. Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2006, p. 14.

⁴⁴ Aga Khan Foundation which is part of the Aga Khan Development Network.

⁴⁵ Fararoon, R./Gosztanyi, K./Mukhopadhyay, D./Theuss, M., *Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment System Workshop*. Kabul: Aga Khan Foundation, 2004.

⁴⁶ Bush, K., *A Measure of Peace: The Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment of Development Projects in Conflict Zones*. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1998.

Conflict and power

Power or 'key position' conflicts affect the whole of Badakhshan. Competitors locked in struggles have various resources and networks available, e.g., young men in the village, elders, and kinship links. Dense social networks with the ability to mobilize fighters or deliver severe social sanctions are key preconditions of violence.⁴⁷ The provincial representative of the central government can be an important referral point in conflicts and is seen as part of the legitimate rule of law in an environment which has been largely ruled by gun or power interests.

Disputes over scarce resources can also be mediated by a commander or local councils (*shura*) if there is no government representative in action. Interestingly, results of the 2006 Asia Foundation survey discussed earlier show that almost 33 percent of respondents still approach local leaders for settlement of problems⁴⁸ while 20 percent reported that they go to formal government courts, though this could be questioned in light of CSIS findings that no dispute is decided without bribery.⁴⁹ Another 16 percent said they would approach local *shura* members in cases of disputes. The 20 percent who also mentioned going to tribal leaders might be grouped with those having recourse to local commanders. Such mediation has important implications because commanders and often traditional leaders/*shura* members take fees for mediating, which in turn strengthens their power.

As well, and perhaps more importantly, local conflicts can be opportunities for attacking rival commanders. This happened in 2005 when demonstrations and attacks by mobs against NGOs in one central Badakhshan district (Baharak) saw police and supporters of two rival commanders respond with weapons. Subsequently, a number of locals were killed and NGO offices destroyed. The stronger commander supported NGO safety, the same one who provided his helicopter for evacuation after attacks in 2004, thus legitimizing his position as power broker in the conflict.

⁴⁷ Gosztanyi, K., 'Conflict Arenas and Conflict Processing Institutions in Badakhshan Province (northeastern Afghanistan)', *Berliner Osteuropa Info*, No. 21, 2004, pp. 13–27. <http://www.oei.fu-berlin.de/en/projekte/cscqa/downloads/boi20.pdf>

⁴⁸ The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2006*. Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2006, p. 59.

⁴⁹ Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), *Voices of a New Afghanistan*. Washington DC: CSIS, 2006, p. 2.

Conflict over resources

It is difficult to talk of a strict division between resource conflicts and power conflicts in many cases, because disputes are often multi-dimensional. In the absence of government representatives and rule of law, e.g., property laws, conflict frequently develops. 62 percent of disputes across Afghanistan are related to ownership of land.⁵⁰ Such conflict occurred after Arab Kuchi nomads who owned pasture land in Shiwa District left during 1990's fighting and had commanders sell their land to other locals. When the Kuchis returned after 2001 to claim land, the new local owners refused to leave.

Another example of resource-conflict concerns competing ownership claims for firewood in a forest situated between two villages which also have ongoing disputes over irrigation-water and pasture. In the conflict over scarce forest resources, elders from both villages mobilized groups of young men – one to collect wood, and the other to protect it. The situation escalated, fighting broke out and villagers were injured. There were related conflicts affecting relations between the villages but the point in this case is that it was the elders of the villages who gave the order to confront, and obviously fight to protect/gain what they believed was theirs. In some cases the *shura* can provide a mediating role. In several cases in Badakhshan where the government representative (*wolliswol*) was involved, his decision appears to have been just as readily accepted, though in the case of commanders and government institutions, imposed fines often imposed make people reticent to approach formal judiciary.

Conflict and opium trade

Once again conflict in which commanders are more frequently than not involved is in relation to opium. The involvement of commanders in the widespread narcotics trade network is well known. Such conflict erupted when an important religious leader in Wakhan District (an Ismaili area) opposed a local commander over opium trading. Each campaigned against the other, one imposing fines, the other demoting the commander, each gaining greater influence. While the commander profited from the narcotics trade network, the Shah benefited from a good alternative local economy enabling him to collect relatively high religious taxes. The Shah also gained prestige since his own religious leader had delivered a *fatwa* with regard to opium cultivation and consumption. In the absence of government representation and sustainable

⁵⁰ The Asia Foundation, *A Survey of Afghan People: Afghanistan in 2006*. Kabul: The Asia Foundation, 2006, p. 58.

economy, competing leadership and narcotics have fuelled conflict potential. Keep in mind that the division between commander and government representative is not always clear for some commanders have been viewed as informal government representatives, important in considering good governance issues.

Another aspect of the opium industry is that most of Badakhshan's opium is turned into heroin within the province, thus doubling its value.⁵¹ With easy access to borders, and some border routes and crossings which are controlled by commanders, Badakhshan's strategic position gives it a stranglehold on drug trafficking which is difficult to control and a highly profitable source of income (for some at least). The other side of this industry is that poppy farmers are often trapped into growing because they have been financed with several years of payment ahead of time so they have no choice but to grow. A side effect of an aggressive campaign of poppy eradication in eastern Nangarhar Province saw daughters given as repayment for debts – not unheard of in the north.⁵²

The way forward

One might conclude from the multitude of surveys done in Afghanistan by so many organisations whose funding is similar, and by the flurry of one day visits from prominent personalities in countries allied in the war to win hearts and minds, as well as public meetings between leaders of Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the less public meetings between Afghanistan's President and the head of the Taliban or warlords with pro-Taliban and even pro-Al Qaeda supporters, that things really are as General Richards declared – in a state of near anarchy with no clear way forward.

There are many scenarios in the continuing Great Game of course⁵³ but all as difficult to address in the short-term. The International Crisis Group has recently reiterated that even five years on there are no quick fixes in Afghanistan⁵⁴ and as the CSIS evaluation study concludes:

⁵¹ Johnson, C./Leslie, J., *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace*. London: Zed Books, 2004, p. 116.

⁵² Stockman, F., Daughters Pay the Price in Afghan War on Drugs. *International Herald Tribune*, 29 September 2005.

⁵³ Rashid, A., *Taliban: Islam, Oil, and the New Great Game in Central Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000.

⁵⁴ International Crisis Group, *Countering Afghanistan's Insurgency: No quick fixes*. Asia Report No. 123. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2006.

Afghans should be able to see the benefits that come with cooperation with the government. All communities have different priorities, different levels of support for the government and different experiences with construction. Countrywide strategies that are not tailored to match the diversity of needs and priorities ... are at best wasteful and at worst counter-productive. The big issues remain ... how to provide economic development ... with serious security constraints. The international community should realize that Afghanistan is at a tipping point.

A report prepared for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) in 2005 concluded, Afghanistan has emerged as one of the world's largest humanitarian disasters.⁵⁵ While strengthening the state may enforce conflict prevention and manage conflict, much more is needed in the short term. Even with better coordination of the donor community, more systematic and strategic mechanisms need to be developed and implemented so that Afghan leaders can take control of the economy. In the final analysis, this is the major concern of Afghans today and is more often than not the basis of conflict – power and control over resources, resource benefits and the people able to make them profitable.

Finally, a question which needs to be considered seriously as the Taliban re-establish themselves in the south, managing to do for some people what the government has failed to do, especially in regard to law and order, and the provision of justice and dispute mechanisms, is the Taliban gaining legitimacy in the eyes of (some) Afghan people?

Does the future see a new relationship of the Afghan government with the Taliban? Is there a possibility that a newly oriented, reputedly reformed Afghan Taliban will become a legitimate player in the socio-political scene in Afghanistan? What would this mean for the disparate groups who align themselves with the Taliban, politically and militarily even if not completely ideologically? Are we looking at a situation where the Taliban becomes a new Hezbollah or Hamas, caring for local people who see themselves as disenfranchised and reaping few benefits from the official government or criminal commander elites?⁵⁶

Would international players come to the table with Taliban, ex-warlords, tribal leaders and vice versa? Or does the International Crisis Group (ICG)

⁵⁵ Swanström, N./Cornell, S., *Strategic Conflict Analysis of Afghanistan*. Prepared for the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency. Uppsala: Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, 2005, p. 16.

⁵⁶ BBC reported in early 2007 that the Taliban movement had earmarked USD 1 million to set up schools in southern Afghanistan. BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/south-asia>, 23 January 2007

reflect a determined international stance: “By refusing to exclude undesirable elements from positions of power in the new institutions because it was thought they could help on priority matters such as the struggle against terrorism, the international community all too often honoured the Bonn Agreement more in letter than spirit. State-building was warped from the start. To serve its own interests and those of the Afghan people better, the international community must now show more spine by demanding serious steps of the Karzai government to remove corrupt officials and establish clearer time-tables for action, and it must impose penalties when the government fails to implement commitments to end impunity.”⁵⁷

The question remains – which players and for which Taliban? While people in Afghanistan who have been surveyed generally say they do not want a return to Taliban rule, the current state of affairs is providing little/no alternative. Another five years on will be too late for Afghanistan.

⁵⁷ International Crisis Group, *Afghanistan's Endangered Compact*. Asia Briefing No. 59, Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2007.