

# UN INVOLVEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN

## POST-TALIBAN RECONSTRUCTION

*Throughout history, Afghanistan has been beset by warlordism, internal strife and also subjected to foreign invasions. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was at the centre of the “Great Game” played between the Russian Empire and British India. In the late twentieth century the last Afghan War, which involved the mujahedeen with support from Pakistan, the US and other powers on one side and the Afghan communist government and the Soviet Union on the other, ended with the latter’s withdrawal in 1989. In the mujahedeen and Taliban, the people of Afghanistan hoped for a future of peace and prosperity, rather than the hostility that was to come. In the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 attacks in the US, international forces invaded the country. Although the Taliban were toppled within a month, much was left to rebuild and reconstruct. This paper delineates the reconstruction process in Afghanistan and the role of the United Nations as an institution which has time and again been appointed as a guardian of peace and development in the world*

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“Rebuilding war-ravaged regions is inevitably going to be difficult. Even a superficial look at the history of such exercises is enough to establish the inherent complexity involved. And when the war-torn country in question is Afghanistan—a country whose unfortunate destiny it has been to serve as a battlefield for imperial ambitions since 1978—then it becomes a tougher task altogether” (Nadia Sarwar, “UN Role in Rebuilding Afghanistan”, *Strategic Studies*, vol30, nos1 and 2, 2010, Institute of Strategic Studies, Islamabad, Pakistan, p1, online at <http://www.issi.org.pk>).

## INTRODUCTION

A war torn country since the time of its genesis, Afghanistan has suffered economically, materially and physically. Most recently, with the “war on terror”, it has become the theatre of war for the United States of America (US) and its allies. This time as well the country has suffered hardships that seem to have no end. Prosperity and infrastructural development have been prevented by continuous fighting, which has also led to a large number of refugees in the neighbouring countries of Iran and Pakistan. Geographically, Afghanistan has been at the crossroads of invading empires, a network of trade routes and a meeting place for different cultures. The great Asian civilisations—Chinese and Indian—were inter-linked through routes crossing the country. One historian summarised the region of Afghanistan as follows, “No land in ancient times was more thoroughly traversed in every direction. Doubtless no other was so well situated geographically to act as a link between east and west” (Nabi Misdaq, *Afghanistan: Political Fertility and External Interference*, London: Routledge, 2006, p35). Afghanistan still occupies an important political and strategic position with regard to Central, South and West Asia. Perhaps

its biggest misfortune is to have been entangled for so many years in other people’s politics—as a buffer state between the imperial powers of Britain and Russia in the nineteenth century, as a battleground for the twentieth century struggle between the Soviet Union and the US, as a focus for regional political rivalries and finally as the area of continuing Western intervention since 2001.

Due to its location along the crucial trade route between Asia and the Middle East, Afghanistan has been repeatedly invaded and conquered by foreign rulers and countries for centuries. The roots of the current instability may be traced back to a period far beyond the Soviet invasion of December 1979. Afghanistan has always been strategically important—easily penetrable from Central Asia it leads on to India in the east and Persia and the riches of the Middle East in the

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west. Alexander the Great who traversed these lands in the fourth century BCE left an indelible mark on the region and after his death southern Afghanistan was often ruled from northern India. Although Islam came to the area in the seventh century CE, the invaders were unable to hold on to the territory and were soon expelled. Prior to this Hinduism and Buddhism had been influential and Hindu kings had ruled from Kabul. In the ninth and tenth centuries, local dynasties emerged that adopted Islam. The northern part of the country was often ruled from Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan. The Mongol Genghis Khan arrived in 1219, waged destructive wars and carried away much loot. However, his acclaimed empire fell apart after his death. Towards the end of the fourteenth century, Tamerlane (Timur the Lame) conquered large parts of the country. In 1507, the Uzbeks rose to power in Central Asia and made their capital in Herat, western Afghanistan. From the sixteenth century onwards, eastern Afghanistan south of the Hindu Kush was a part of the Mughal Empire. The modern Afghan state emerged in the mid-eighteenth century when the Pashtun Ahmad Shah Durrani (Abdali) became king. Ever since, Afghanistan has remained a Pashtun-dominated state and it has been up to the Pashtuns to enforce their rule throughout the country. Even today, the societal structure is such that an Afghan is first a member of a clan/tribe then of the nation. As Afghan kings were always Pashtuns most saw them as the ruling class meant to govern the nation. Had other ethnic groups, for instance, the Tajiks provided a king from time to time, a common Afghan ethnic identity may have emerged. However, it was reasonable for the royal family to have been Pashtun since they demographically dominated the country and the Durrani line ruled until 1973. However, after Ahmad Shah's death and with mounting political strife, Afghanistan soon found itself between two expanding empires—the British and Russian (Martin McCauley, *Afghanistan and Central Asia: A Modern History*, London: Pearson, 2002).

In the post-First World War era, Afghanistan regained full sovereignty in 1919. The war exhausted the British, while the Russians were preoccupied in consolidating their revolution. Russia, the first to recognise Afghanistan's independence offered assistance and entered into a *Treaty of Friendship*. The British also accepted Afghan independence by concluding a treaty at Rawalpindi the same year. A number of European states assisted Afghanistan, but the foreign aid was not enough to support the modernisation programme that the country's modernist ruler Amanullah Khan had in mind. The Kingdom of Afghanistan that had existed since the nineteenth century ended when Zahir Shah was overthrown

in a *coup d'état* by Daoud Khan and the country declared a democracy in 1973. Daoud, a cousin of the dethroned king became the prime minister. However, the formation of a republic was followed by many years of instability. Traditional ethnic leaders as well as the Leftist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan constantly opposed Daoud's rule. Leftist military officers led another coup in April 1978 in which Daoud was killed and his government overthrown. Soon after, traditional ethnic leaders and Islamic fundamentalist elements began an armed revolt against communist rule.

Nadia Sarwar (*ibid*) delineates the various cycles that Afghanistan has undergone, since the Soviet invasion, which changed the whole dimension of politics until the recent "war on terror", which has given the region (including neighbouring countries) a more global perspective. She has divided the chronology into four phases. The first phase was from 1979–89, with the Soviet invasion and the resistance of *mujahedeen* forces backed by the US. The second phase from 1989–94 was when the civil war took place between various *mujahedeen* factions—a destructive phase in the post-Soviet invasion period. The third phase from 1994–2001 was about the internal issues of Afghanistan when an alliance was formed between the *Taliban* and *al Qaeda* forces and lasted until the 9/11 attacks in the US. The start of the global war on terror, began the new and latest phase in the history of Afghanistan, with the *Taliban* (now deemed a militant group) pitted against the Afghan government in Kabul and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) led coalition forces.

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#### SOVIET INTERVENTION AND UN EFFORTS

Afghanistan has been in the limelight since the Soviet invasion of December 1979, when it became a geopolitical issue in the Cold War (Misdaq, *ibid*, p1). Engagement in Afghan conflicts has been always inspired by strategic vision

and the country used as a battlefield between competing global and regional powers and groups—in the 1980s, between the former communist Soviet Union and the capitalist West (mainly the US) and in the 1990s between Pakistan and Arab Gulf countries on the one hand and Iran and Russia on the other. World reaction to the Soviet occupation was swift. On 7 January 1980 the nonaligned group deploring the intervention and calling for “the immediate, unconditional and total withdrawal of foreign troops” sponsored a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution (*ibid*, p156). On 14 January 1980, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a similar motion and in November that year, approved a second resolution calling for the withdrawal of foreign troops by a majority vote of 111 to 22 with 12 abstentions (*ibid*). Most Western and Islamic countries also strongly condemned the Soviet intervention and declared it a threat to world peace. American President Jimmy Carter said the attack was “an extremely serious threat to peace ... (and) a violation of the United Nations Charter”. He called Soviet President Leonid Brezhnev’s explanation in their private communication, as “completely inadequate and misleading” (Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A New History*, London: Curzon Press, 2002, p207). Carter’s statement that the Soviet invasion constituted the “greatest threat to peace since the Second World War” set the tone (Barnett R Rubin, *The Search for Peace in Afghanistan: From Buffer State to Failed State*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995, p30).

The presence of foreign troops on Afghan soil caused localised resistance to evolve into a nationwide uprising. The communist takeover in 1978 threatened the common Afghan’s life and resistance therefore became a matter of honour incorporating the notion of revenge. For the Afghans, the impact of the invasion was completely unexpected and therefore stunning (Misdaq, *ibid*, p156). The *mujahedeen* (holy warriors) especially in the initial years of the invasion came from nearly every ethnic group and tribe in the country. Islam as a religion served as the ideology of resistance giving it direct legitimacy even in the absence of authoritative figures exercising a leadership role (William Maley, *The Afghanistan Wars*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002, p58). However, despite certain unifying factors, the resistance never formed a national leadership. The Soviet intervention invited counter-intervention from Iran, the Islamic states of the Middle East, Pakistan and Western powers. The latter especially the US saw this as an opportunity to dent the “might” of communism by making the occupation as expensive as possible both economically and politically. The West soon realised

that to resist Soviet forces the Afghans needed substantial military aid. Thus, Islamic militants and people in support of transnational extremism became the favoured US-backed fighters. The Americans, determined to make Afghanistan the Soviet Union's "Vietnam", poured in weapons to arm the opposition. Humanitarian assistance was closely tied with Western efforts to bring about a Soviet withdrawal and the collapse of the communist regime (Chris Johnson, *Afghanistan*, United Kingdom: Oxfam, 2004, p19). All foreign financial and military aid was channelled through Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence to the resistance groups. The Gulf States, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya and the United Arab Emirates together with private Arab sources also contributed towards the war (Misdaq, *ibid*, p159).

Mediation by the United Nations (UN) in Afghanistan started soon after the Soviet intervention. The first reaction against Soviet aggression was the special session of the General Assembly in January 1980, which voted in favour of a resolution condemning the intervention and thereafter a number of resolutions were passed every year until the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989. According to Gilles Dorronsoro (*Revolution Unending: Afghanistan – 1979 to the Present*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2005, p121), the UN adopted a policy of indirect rapprochement for mediation that brought together the Afghan and Pakistani governments in the presence of American and Soviet observers and finally the *Geneva Accords* were signed on 14 April 1988. The occupation of Afghanistan brought no success to the Soviet Union, rather it was weakened by diminishing resources at home and increasing resistance in the occupied land. After the accords and through UN promoted negotiations, Moscow began the withdrawal process. The accords included "a bilateral agreement between the Republic of Afghanistan and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan ... about non-interference and non-intervention in each other's matters" (online at <http://www.un.org>). The secretary-general with the authorisation of the Security

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Council established the United Nations Good Offices Mission in Afghanistan and Pakistan. It was mandated to oversee the withdrawal of foreign troops and authorised to receive complaints from both sides about any alleged improper implementation of the agreement. With the lapse of the mission's mandate a year after the Soviet withdrawal, the Office of the Secretary-General in Afghanistan and Pakistan was established on 15 March 1990, which had the dual set-up of a military and political component. Benon Sevan, the personal representative of the secretary-general who headed the office, formulated a plan that included independence and self-determination, a ceasefire, a cessation of arms supplies and a "transition mechanism" leading to free and fair elections and a broad-based government. Sevan's transition plan however "broke down with the disintegration of the state that the interim government was supposed to rule over" (Maley, 2002, *ibid*, p147).

#### POST-SOVIET WITHDRAWAL CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The withdrawal of the Soviet Union did not bring peace to Afghanistan. While other nations celebrated the end of the Cold War, the country degenerated into chaos amidst the factional fighting of *mujahedeen* leaders. Civil war continued after the withdrawal and became a multilateral competition involving internal armed factions with extensive foreign links, neighbouring states pursuing competing strategic interests and extra-regional players with economic, ideological and/or security stakes. The US, its regional partners and various *mujahedeen* groups had different objectives and found it hard to cooperate. For instance, the *mujahedeen* resisted Pakistani attempts to place favoured Islamist radical groups in power. The fragmentation of power as much as the central regime's illegitimacy was the real obstacle to a political settlement (Rubin, *ibid*, p9). However, due to the disjointed nature of the resistance with shifting loyalties and rivalries, the *mujahedeen* were unable to turn local victories into national ones. The Mohammad Najibullah administration, which never fully achieved popular support, was able to defend the government from *mujahedeen* attacks for three years from 1989 to 1992 (Martin Ewans, *Conflict in Afghanistan: Studies in Asymmetric Warfare*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p123). After the fall of the communist government in April 1992, the resistance entered a new stage of the struggle, this time attempting to seize power on a national level (Misdaq,

*ibid*, p169). During 1992–94, the conflict became highly territorialised and the country divided into war zones under various warlords, who themselves were divided along ethnic lines (Dorronsoro, *ibid*, p257). According to Jeffery J Roberts (*The Origins of Conflict in Afghanistan*, London: Praeger, 2003, p232) the civil war that followed was on the surface a clash between the Pashtuns and the people of northern Afghanistan.

In this tense atmosphere, the UN attempted to manage transition. As stated above, following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, Afghanistan was thrown into civil war. The UN however did not send peacekeeping forces to bring about a truce and its role was limited to offering good offices to conflicting parties to negotiate a settlement. In May 1991, following extensive discussions between Afghan actors and Benon Sevan, Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar proposed the transfer of power to a credible and impartial transition mechanism. This plan however failed in part because of the continuation of Soviet aid to Kabul and the continued fighting of various rebel factions against the Najibullah government, which ultimately fell in 1992. The United Nations Special Mission in Afghanistan (UNSMIA) was then established with a mandate for “facilitating national rapprochement and reconstruction”, beyond merely monitoring and reporting events (Ebrahim Afsah and Alexandra Hilal Guhr, “Afghanistan: Building a State to Keep the Peace”, *Max Planck Yearbook of United Nations Law*, no9, 2005, pp396–8). Unfortunately, all attempts at finding a peaceful political settlement were unsuccessful.

In 1994, the multi-factionalism among *mujahedeen* leaders grew, resulting in a period of warlordism and a fight for control over Kabul. The ongoing chaos in the country gave rise to the *Taliban* (students/seekers of knowledge) whose leaders effectively exploited the conditions of anarchy, foreign intervention,

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lawlessness and warlordism to shape their movement and seek local support (Meredith L Runion, *The History of Afghanistan*, London: Greenwood Press, 2007, p120). The main external power—Pakistan—supported the *Taliban* throughout. Originally, a Sunni Muslim puritanical movement, the *Taliban* were composed of Pashtun students from southern Afghanistan. Their primary goal was to spread Islamic law in the region. The emergence and advent to dominance of the *Taliban* movement was one of the oddest things ever to happen to modern Afghanistan and their pattern of rule was one of the strangest to be witnessed in the modern world, perhaps because it was so determinedly anti-modernist (Maley, 2002, *ibid*, p218). They created a politico-religious force of Pashtuns from southern Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan. The latter played a key role in the internal politics of its neighbouring country from originally funding, organising and training the *mujahedeen* resistance to switching support to the *Taliban* movement (Rasul Bakhsh Rais, *Recovering the Frontier State: War, Ethnicity and State in Afghanistan*, New York: Lexington Books, 2008, p67). Various explanations were given for Pakistan backing the *Taliban*. Some commentators saw in it a relentless search for “strategic depth” in the event of a conventional war with India. Others saw it as driven by economic concerns, notably the belief that there were profits to be made from oil and gas pipelines from Central to South Asia through a stable Afghanistan. Still others defended the policy in terms of ethnic factors and the alleged “need” for Afghanistan to be ruled by Pashtuns, but not Pashtuns of a nationalist stripe (Maley, 2002, *ibid*, p222).

The *Taliban* militia mainly comprised the sons and orphans of the religious element of the *mujahedeen* who fought against Soviet occupation with American and Pakistani support. Between 1994 and 1996, “the US supported the *Taliban* politically through its allies Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, essentially because Washington viewed the *Taliban* as anti-Iranian, anti-Shia and pro-Western” (Rashid Ahmed, *Descent into Chaos: Pakistan, Afghanistan and the Threat to Global Security*, London: Penguin, 2008, p176). The *Taliban* took control of most of southern and western Afghanistan, including Kandahar and Herat by early 1995 and in September 1996 seized Kabul. President Burhanuddin Rabbani joined the opposition, which came to be known as the Northern Alliance (Jagmohan Maher (Ed), *Afghanistan Dynamics of Survival*, New Delhi: Kalpaz, 2008). After the surrender of the *mujahedeen* warlords, the *Taliban* worked quickly to issue and implement policies that brought the country to an orthodox Islamic way of

life. Fighting however continued with the coalition of opposition forces without interruption from 1996 to 2001 and there were massive killings and ethnic cleansing by the *Taliban*. As the regime was responsible for gross violations of human rights, it invited the attention of the UN. Despite its rapid rise and control over 90 percent of the country, the international body did not recognise its legitimacy and considered the government a non-entity. The UNSMA took on the responsibility of investigating allegations of human rights abuses. While the work of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs was limited to its humanitarian aspect, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) tried in vain to launch reconstruction programmes.

However, at times all activities had to be suspended due to threats to the safety of personnel and other security reasons. During this period, the UN repeatedly pointed out the difficulty in resolving the conflict as long as foreign powers continued to provide military equipment to the belligerents. At the end of 1997, Secretary-General Kofi Annan bluntly stated, "They all enthusiastically proclaim their support to the United Nations peacemaking efforts but at the same time continue to fan the conflict by pouring in arms, money and other supplies to their preferred Afghan factions. They must be held responsible for exacerbating the bloody conflict in Afghanistan"

(Chris Johnson and Jolyon Leslie, *Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace*, London: Zed Books, 2004, p69). The UN as an organisation found the *Taliban* extraordinarily difficult to handle. The failure of UN efforts and other agreements to establish peace and help form a stable government especially as civil war continued created debate in the academic world. According to some scholars, during the civil war period the country turned from a regional conflict to a failed state while others called Afghanistan a country without a state. A failed state may be characterised by the "collapse of state institutions, especially the police and judiciary, with

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resulting paralysis of government, a breakdown of law and order as well as general banditry and chaos” (Christine Noelle-Karimi, Conrad J Schetter and Reinhard Schlagintweit (Eds), *Afghanistan: A Country without a State*, London: IKO-Verlag, 2002, p205). Ever since, Afghanistan has been going through the turmoil of conflict and statebuilding.

#### POST-TALIBAN UN INVOLVEMENT AND RECONSTRUCTION EFFORTS

On 1 October 2001, in his address to the General Assembly session on terrorism Annan stated, “As we summon the will and the resources needed to succeed in the struggle against terrorism, we must also care for all the victims of terrorism” (“Press Release”, SG/SM/7977, GA/9920, online at <http://www.un.org>). Keeping this in mind and since it started playing a role in the post-*Taliban* reconstruction of war torn Afghanistan, the UN has tried to ensure that the people receive the bare necessities to support them in the never-ending turmoil of the war torn years. After 9/11, the “war on terror” and the fall of the *Taliban*, the UN took the initiative to develop an ambitious statebuilding process, aimed at reforming and rebuilding one of the world’s poorest and most conflict-ridden countries.

The United Nations plays a distinctive role in conflict resolution in divided societies and countries. This is part of its overall responsibility for maintaining international peace and security—the fundamental reason behind its establishment. As per Article 1 of the UN Charter, its purpose is “To maintain international peace and security and to take effective collective measures for the prevention and removal of threats to the peace and for the suppression of acts of aggression or other breaches of the peace and to bring about by peaceful means and in conformity with the principles of justice and international law, adjustment or settlement of international disputes or situations, which might lead to a breach of the peace” (Michael W Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, *Making War and Building Peace: United Nations Peace Operations*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006, p10). Furthermore, according to the Charter, the UN has a moral obligation to intervene in the internal affairs of a war torn country and accordingly it has played a multifaceted role in the development of the Afghan state. As it comprises a number of organisations with defined roles in various fields—economic, political, social, etc—its role in the development of

basic social services and infrastructural facilities has been time and again much praised and appreciated.

As the United Nations has evolved, its role in world politics has adapted to necessities and changing realities. As a result, a new political function has emerged that Inis L Claude has termed “collective legitimisation” (Kashi Prasad Misra (Ed), *Afghanistan in Crisis*, New Delhi: Vikas, 1981, p202). The UN’s role has altered over the years in response to new phases of conflict and changes in the global environment. During the Cold War, the organisation began intervening in interstate conflicts, while in 1990 with the end of the Cold War,

as the international scenario changed, the UN also made changes in its approach to resolving conflicts and rapidly expanded its agenda for peace and security (Michael Griffin, *Reaping the Whirlwind: Afghanistan, al Qaeda and the Holy War*, London: Pluto Press, 2003, p8). Since then, in a growing number of instances the UN and other international actors have sought to rebuild or establish new political institutions in states or territories recovering from violent conflict. From Afghanistan, Iraq and the Western Balkans to less publicised areas of conflict in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Central America and the South Pacific, international organisations’ response has involved extensive intrusions into the domestic affairs of sovereign states. Extending beyond the narrow mandates of traditional peacekeeping and humanitarian relief operations, these interventions have aspired to restructure local political authority within a democratic framework. The extended UN agenda was outlined in Secretary-General Boutros Boutros Ghali’s *An Agenda for Peace* of 1992 (Stefan Wolff and Christalla Yakinthou, *Conflict Resolution: Theories and Practice*, London: Routledge, 2011, p21) and included four principles—conflict prevention or preventive diplomacy, peacemaking, peacekeeping and lastly peacebuilding or post-conflict reconstruction. The last is a broad concept that includes a complex lengthy process. It encompasses developmental, humanitarian, human rights and political mechanisms and programmes organised to foster economic and

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social cooperation with the purpose of building confidence among previously warring parties, developing the economic, political and social infrastructure to prevent future violence and laying the foundation for a durable and sustainable peace (Doyle and Sambanis, *ibid*, p10).

Reconstruction as the first step in a long-term recovery process entails economic, psychological and social readjustment. Post-conflict reconstruction in Afghanistan has been a multidimensional enterprise involving the creation of state institutions, disarming of warlords, human resettlement, providing security in the critical years of national recovery, putting in place acceptable and pragmatic political arrangements and revival of the economy. Although most are familiar with post-conflict reconstruction strategies and the successes and failures from other parts of the world may be borrowed from, each situation is unique because of the social structure of the conflict, the geopolitics of the region and the character of the forces involved (Rais, *ibid*, p67). The post-*Taliban* reconstruction effort in Afghanistan has been immense, complex and complicated, carried out through the coordination of the Afghan government, bilateral donors, international organisations, local and international nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) and UN agencies. Afghanistan became a member of the UN in 1946 and while the organisation has remained active in the country throughout, it has been more extensively involved since 1980. With the signing of the *Geneva Accords* in 1988 and the Soviet withdrawal, the UN pledged an active presence in the country and its institutional structures have been working accordingly (Rhoda Margesson, *United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan: Background and Policy Issues*, Congressional Research Service, July 2009, p2). The world body keeps separate offices for political and peace processes and for humanitarian and reconstruction operations. Throughout the violent civil war years of the 1990s, the UN continued to seek a peace agreement that would allow for sustained reconstruction. Its efforts were exerted in two interrelated directions—eliciting an agreement from outside powers to endorse a stronger role for the UN and promoting a national and international consensus on elements for a political settlement (Riaz M Khan, *Untying the Afghan Knot: Negotiating Soviet Withdrawal*, Lahore: Progressive Publishers, 1993, p111).

At the fall of the *Taliban* in 2001, Afghanistan was a nation in tatters in need of basic relief, civil development and reconstruction. Since then, the UN has taken active steps to ensure the establishment of a permanent broad-based government in the country and has fashioned several binding resolutions

addressing reconstruction. On 3 October 2001, Annan appointed Lakdhar Brahimi as his special representative with a “widened mandate entailing overall authority for the humanitarian and political endeavours of the United Nations in Afghanistan” (William Maley, *Rescuing Afghanistan*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006, p111). The UN adopted the guiding principles of bolstering Afghan capacity both official and non-governmental, relying on a limited international presence and on as many Afghan staff as possible. This “light footprint” approach (Simon Chesterman, “Walking Softly in Afghanistan: The Future of UN Statebuilding”, *Survival*, no2, 2002, p37) was different from previous peace operations. Instead of running a civilian transitional administration as in East Timor and Kosovo, the idea was for Afghanistan to develop itself by taking charge from the beginning (Iselin Hebbert Larsen, *The UNAMA in Afghanistan: Challenges and Opportunities in Peacemaking, Statebuilding and Coordination*, Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2010, p21). Based on this approach, every UN mission and development programme has stressed the importance of local ownership—“Afghan solutions for Afghan problems” was the *mantra* of the preparations for Afghanistan’s reconstruction.

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#### THE BONN AGREEMENT: AFGHANISTAN’S RECONSTRUCTION STRATEGY

**I**n November 2001, the Security Council unanimously adopted *Resolution 1378* endorsing UN efforts to help the Afghan people establish a new government. It called for immediate efforts to establish a “broad-based multi-ethnic” transitional administration. Following this and under UN auspices, participants met in Bonn, Germany, to outline a process for political transition in Afghanistan and set a



timetable for the reconstruction process (Margesson, *ibid*, p5). The *Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan pending the Re-establishment of Permanent Government Institutions (Bonn Agreement)* signed on 5 December 2001 (Maley, 2006, *ibid*, p31) was endorsed by UNSC *Resolution 1385*. The agreement set out the political roadmap for Afghanistan and called for the establishment of an interim governing structure and set a timetable for transition to a more “broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic and fully representative government” (Johnson and Leslie, *ibid*, p159). An Afghan Interim Authority (December 2001 to June 2002) headed by Hamid Karzai was formed whose function was to choose a *loya jirga* (grand council) to draft the Afghan constitution and establish an Afghan Transitional Authority (June 2002 to December 2003) (Isaac Kfir, “Peacebuilding’ in Afghanistan: A Bridge Too Far”, *Defence Studies*, vol12, no2, 2012, p154). The UN then assisted the Afghan Transitional Authority in organising public consultations to provide inputs from citizens prior to the constitutional *loya jirga*. Subsequently, a constitution considered by many as the most progressive in Afghan history was approved in January 2004. According to Barnett R Rubin (“Crafting a Constitution for Afghanistan”, Project Muse, online at <http://www.constitutionnet.org>), “This was the first Afghan constitutional process where the outcome was open to political debate and the UN insisted on introducing a measure of public consultation into the process” (Richard J Ponzio, “Transforming Political Authority: UN Democratic Peacebuilding in Afghanistan”, *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, , vol13, no2, April–June 2007, pp255–75). Following this, Karzai was elected president in October 2004 and parliamentary and provincial elections were subsequently held in September 2005.

The *Bonn Agreement* also called for the establishment of a Supreme Court and a Judicial Commission; requested the Security Council to consider authorising the deployment of UN-mandated security forces; outlined the role of the UN during the interim period and emphasised the need for cooperation with the international community on a number of issues, including counternarcotics, crime, elections, reconstruction and terrorism (Margesson, *ibid*, p5). On 20 December 2001, the UNSC decided to establish an International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to aid the Afghan Interim Authority under the *Bonn Agreement* (Larsen, *ibid*, p30). The deployment of a 4,500-strong force was authorised for Kabul to be later extended to other parts of the country. The objectives of the UN in 2002 were to support the implementation of the *Bonn Agreement* processes and promote

national reconciliation and rapprochement across the country. Accordingly, all components of UN activities were grouped under a single United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). Established by Security Council *Resolution 1401* of 28 March 2002, it has been the focal point of international assistance to the country. The mission's primary mandate has been to help Afghan parties implement the provisions of the *Bonn Agreement*. Its overall goal has been to promote peace and stability, national reconciliation and dealing with humanitarian and development efforts. UNAMA's mandate has been renewed annually in March and UNSC *Resolution 1806* of 2008 significantly expanded its authority. UNSC *Resolution 1868* of 2009 not only extended the mandate for another year but also incorporated the increased scope, which included leading international civilian efforts to support the Afghan government; increasing cooperation with the ISAF; developing greater political outreach with Afghan leaders and providing good offices in support of Afghan-led reconciliation programmes (*ibid*, p4). UNAMA's operations in post-*Taliban*

era Afghanistan have been different from other UN conducted operations in the post-Cold War era (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cambodia, Eastern Slavonia, etc) in that it has had no operational responsibility for administering any part of the country. The *Bonn Agreement*, which was fully implemented in 2005, only drove the Afghan political settlement and reconstruction roadmap. It was only a preliminary step towards post-war order and laid the foundation for political transition after 23 years of war. However, the revival of the *Taliban* and renewed attacks are the most palpable and in many ways, the most disturbing threat to security in Afghanistan.

Following the conclusion of the Bonn process, the Afghan government and international community agreed on a shared vision for the long-term development and reconstruction of the country. The rebuilding process supported by various UN backed programmes included the Afghan Compact, the Afghan National

**Over the years, UN led reconstruction has faced many challenges. The resurgence of warlords and the persistence of insurgent activities by remnants of the *Taliban* have fostered insecurity and obstructed the reconstruction process. The fragmented international involvement and the lack of effective cooperation between agencies has limited the success of reconstruction efforts.**

Development Strategy, UN sponsored international conferences, UN efforts of institution building and the UN Development Assistance Framework. The Afghan Compact adopted on 31 January 2006 in London pledged continued international assistance to Afghanistan for a five-year period (2006–11) to enhance economic and social development, governance, human rights, rule of law and security (Barnett R Rubin and Humayun Hamidzada, “From Bonn to London: Governance Challenges and the Future of Statebuilding in Afghanistan”, *International Peacekeeping*, vol14, no1, 2007, p10). It was endorsed by the Security Council through *Resolution 1659* of 15 February 2006. The compact provided a strategy for building an effective accountable state with targets for improvements in development, governance and security, including measures for reducing the narcotics economy and promoting regional cooperation. The compact went beyond the traditional realm of a poverty reduction strategy and set a broad agenda for the war torn country (*ibid*). In 2008, a UN backed Paris Conference adopted the Afghan National Development Strategy. Based on the Afghan Compact, it was officially launched on 12 June 2008 and included the following pillars—security (law enforcement, nationwide stabilisation and the personal security of Afghans); political (strengthening of democratic processes and institutions, human rights, the rule of law, delivery of public services and government accountability) and socioeconomic (poverty reduction, promotion of sustainable development through private enterprise and progress towards achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals) (Kfir, *ibid*, p156). Over the years, UN led reconstruction has faced many challenges. The resurgence of warlords and the persistence of insurgent activities by remnants of the *Taliban* have fostered insecurity and obstructed the reconstruction process. The fragmented international involvement and the lack of effective cooperation between agencies—official and unofficial—notably between UNAMA, ISAF, NATO and various NGOs has limited the success of reconstruction efforts.

As part of its initiative in Afghanistan, the UN organised a series of donor conferences on reconstruction and development with the help of international stakeholders, which reaffirmed the terms of the *Bonn Agreement*. The UN proved successful in initiating a flow of foreign aid to the country. Brahimi established the Afghan Interim Authority Fund for facilitating and organising donor contributions. The UN-organised major aid donors’ conference, hosted by the Japanese government in January 2002, resulted in the promise of \$4.5 billion in aid over the next five years. It also stressed on the leading role of the UN in

Afghan reconstruction (Amin Saikal, “The UN and Afghanistan: Contentions in Democratisation and Statebuilding”, *International Peacekeeping*, vol19, no2, 2012, p220). Brahimi’s successor Jean Arnault also proved to be instrumental in raising funds in two critical conferences—Berlin, April 2004 and London, January 2006. The Berlin Conference brought together 65 representatives from various countries and international organisations to focus on reconstruction in Afghanistan and pledges exceeded \$8.2 billion. At the London Conference, the Afghan government and the international community signed a compact that outlined the principles of their cooperation over the next five years and donors pledged \$10.5 billion. The Paris Conference of 12 June 2008 affirmed the expanded role of UNAMA in all aspects of coordination, while The Hague Conference of 31 March 2009 reinforced the central role outlined for UNAMA as coordinator of international action and assistance. It also generated consensus on several points, including the need for a more directed agenda for Afghanistan, emphasising civilian capacity and institutional building with sustained priority areas—economic growth, governance, regional cooperation and security (Margesson, *ibid*, p7). Overall, from 2001 to 2009, donors committed about \$62 billion in grants and loans to Afghanistan (Saikal, *ibid*). However, the wide gap between donor promises and delivery of funds together with rampant corruption has hindered the reconstruction process.

Subsequent reconstruction efforts have been through the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), prepared with the collaboration of national and international partners. Through the framework implemented with Japan’s cooperation, the UN provided assistance worth four billion dollars between the 2010 and 2013. New priority areas were charted out by UNDAF from within the Afghan National Development Strategy. To improve governance, peace and stability, the UN worked with various Afghan ministries and helped in the creation and implementation of policies to stimulate economic growth in agriculture and other areas. It has also aided the government in providing basic social services including education, healthcare, sanitation, etc. For institutional building, the UN launched the Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration

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Programme. This was a part of an ambitious sectoral approach to security sector reforms under the aegis of the Afghanistan New Beginnings Programme funded by Japan and run by the UNDP, while the Afghan government was given the sole responsibility to lead the programme (Shamsul Hadi Shams, “Assessing the Role of Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration in Afghanistan: Internal Security Provision and External Environment”, *Toward bringing Stability in Afghanistan: A Review of the Peacebuilding Strategy*, Institute for Peace Science Hiroshima University English Research Report Series, no 24, 2009, p56). The UN also participated in setting up the Afghan National Army under the leadership of the US, with the support of France and the United Kingdom. In addition, the UN supported the creation of the Afghan National Police begun in August 2002 under German leadership and helped set up a Judicial Reform Commission under Italy’s guidance. As the human rights situation in Afghanistan gave rise to grave concerns throughout this period, the UN began working with the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission as well.

#### UN PLANS IN THE REGION

**Afghanistan’s Millennium Development Goals:** These have defined the phases in which the development of the country has been undertaken in various fields.

**Afghanistan National Development Strategy:** This has stressed on the internal development of the state at the political and social level. Initiated at a conference in Paris on 12 June 2008, it was based on the Afghan Compact. Under the UN Millennium Development Goals, it has also served as an Afghan poverty reduction strategy. Fundamental development goals include agriculture and rural development, economic governance, education and culture, good governance, health and nutrition, infrastructure, natural resources, private sector development, social protection and security.

**UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan:** This was set up on 28 March 2002 under UNSC *Resolution 1401* for assisting the Afghan state in terms of monetary and other benefits. It has served as a tool of the “political and integrated mission” directed by the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations. As the implementation of the *Bonn Agreement* became mandatory, it headed

and executed various responsibilities such as managing relief, recovery and reconstruction activities, holding elections and providing political and strategic advice for the peace process.

**UN Development Programme:** Since the initiation of the peace process, the organisation has played an active role in various key areas including the political arena where it assisted in the convening of a *loya jirga* for settling key political matters and disputes and for consultation and advice in the making of a constitution through comparative experiences. The UN through this institution has supervised and managed presidential, parliamentary and provincial elections.

**UN Development Fund for Women:** This was launched in 2002 after the fall of the *Taliban* regime. As in other countries, the organisation works to empower women and increase the opportunities available to them in all sectors of life. Along with underlining opportunities, it also helps women financially and technically through the introduction of innovative programmes and strategies, which advance economic security, political participation and women's rights. The organisation has its main office in Kabul and extension offices in Ghazni, Herat, Jalalabad, Kapisa, Panjshir and Parwan. There are also coordination offices based in Ghazni, Herat and Parwan. The organisation supports the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) initiated Literacy Initiative for Empowerment and works closely with UNAMA and the state in various joint programmes including the Afghanistan Integrated Functional Literacy Initiative and the Girls Education Initiative.

**UN Children's Fund:** The organisation signed a working plan with the Ministry of Public Health and launched a new plan for setting up national priorities like immunisation, children's health and maternal health. Twelve new schools have been started in Baghlan province in northern Afghanistan to educate 12,000 children.

**UN Development Assistance Fund:** This was prepared through the collaboration of national and international partners and in cooperation with the Joint Coordination and Monitoring Board provided assistance worth four billion dollars between 2010 and 2013.



**UN World Food Programme:** Active in all provinces, this organisation has been working in Afghanistan since 1963. Transforming its role as an agency providing emergency assistance to the overall rehabilitation and recovery of Afghanistan, it now mainly serves those communities living in food-insecure rural areas. The programme has launched a school meals initiative and is helping in the rebuilding of the educational system. The project gives over a million students take-home food rations to encourage enrolment, while nearly half a million girls receive vegetable oil as a bonus to help reduce the gender gap.

**UN Office on Drugs and Crime:** The aim of this organisation is to curb the use and cultivation of drugs as well as drug-related crimes. It has also contributed to development by distributing computers to schools in the northeast of the country.

**UN Food and Agriculture Organisation:** With the cooperation of the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, this organisation has implemented a two million dollar project in the northeast province of Baghlan to assist poor farmers. As a part of the project, 6,600 fruit trees, including almond, apricot, peach and plum were distributed in over a hundred gardens covering 110 acres of farming land. A dairy project has also been implemented, which aims to increase income levels of 1,600 Afghan families by as much as five-fold. With the cooperation of the Swedish Embassy, it has built a road between Sar-i-Pul and Sosma Qala and along with UNESCO and the Italian government has launched a million dollar plan to develop the capacity of educational radio and television (Data taken and analysed from Sarwar, *ibid*, pp 10–20).

A number of UN agencies have thus been making vital contributions in their respective fields with the help of various collaborators, donors and funding agencies. Amidst drawbacks and tensions, they have made worthwhile contributions in rebuilding the lives of the Afghan populace.

#### CHALLENGES TO AND SHORTCOMINGS OF THE UN APPROACH

While military intervention in Afghanistan post-9/11 by American and British forces destroyed the *Taliban* regime and further devastated the country, it also created space for peacebuilding. While the UN played a key

role in supporting the design and implementation of the *Bonn Agreement* and other reconstruction programmes, its efforts have had varied results. Successful post-conflict reconstruction and development is only possible in a secure and stable environment. Unfortunately, this has not been the case in Afghanistan and security challenges remain a major hurdle for UN agencies. Numerous threats and warnings have been received by UN staff since 2001. A lack of skilled human capital is another major challenge that prevents the organisation from accomplishing its ambitious mandate. Finding the right people for specific tasks assigned at the local level has proven to be immensely difficult, as have problems of capacity building, training and corruption, the last perhaps being the biggest problem of all. Inconsistent funding for reconstruction projects has been another major issue, especially with the growing gap between the funds pledged and the amounts delivered by international donors. There has also been insufficient coordination and cooperation in the use of funds with other concerned actors including the European Union, senior civilian NATO representatives and UNAMA. The lack of coordination has delayed and/or jeopardised the implementation of reconstruction programmes, especially in the provinces. The “light footprint” approach has also been criticised, as due to it, the UN has lacked implementation and coordination powers.

**The rebuilding and reconstruction process must follow a model more closely associated with Afghan culture, history and social system. The self-sufficiency and institutional building capacity of the Afghan government and people must be enhanced. Tackling conflict and providing sustainable security require greater efforts in dealing with local disputes as well as positive support from neighbours.**

#### CHALLENGES TO AFGHAN RECONSTRUCTION AND DEVELOPMENT

Post-war reconstruction is a long-term, comprehensive project that requires the honest efforts of a capable governing regime, the international community and organisations like the UN. In Afghanistan, reconstruction efforts—economic, political and social—have been only partly successful due

to many reasons—some endogenous, others exogenous. The *Bonn Agreement* did not provide a comprehensive approach to reconstruction and excluded the conflicting *Taliban* faction from the rebuilding process. The international community failed to realise that in 2001 Afghanistan was more fragmented than it had ever been. Nonetheless, the political rebuilding remained Kabul-centric with unequal representation of diverse ethnic groups. Reconciliation efforts have therefore partly failed because of these contradictions in the Bonn process. However, there are certain other reasons as well including the resurgence of the *Taliban*, the growing conflict between warlords, the lack of capability of the existing central regime, insufficient institutional support, the fragmented nature of implementation efforts, rampant corruption, etc. The rebuilding and reconstruction process must follow a model more closely associated with Afghan culture, history and social system. Focusing on a bottom-up and Afghan-centric approach that encourages local empowerment is imperative. The self-sufficiency and institutional building capacity of the Afghan government and people must be enhanced. Tackling conflict and providing sustainable security require greater efforts in dealing with local disputes as well as positive support from neighbours.

## CONCLUSION

An analysis of the role the UN has played, its shortcomings and the challenges faced shows that they cannot be treated in isolation. From an all-encompassing view, the UN must receive due appreciation from the international community for its continuous concerted efforts with regard to Afghanistan's reconstruction. Many however state that its "light approach" has prevented it from controlling the process to ensure better results as it did in East Timor and Kosovo, which were fully administered UN provinces. Despite many grievances, the UN's role in providing the bare necessities to the Afghan people, which they have lacked and been deprived of for years, must not be underestimated or unappreciated. ❧