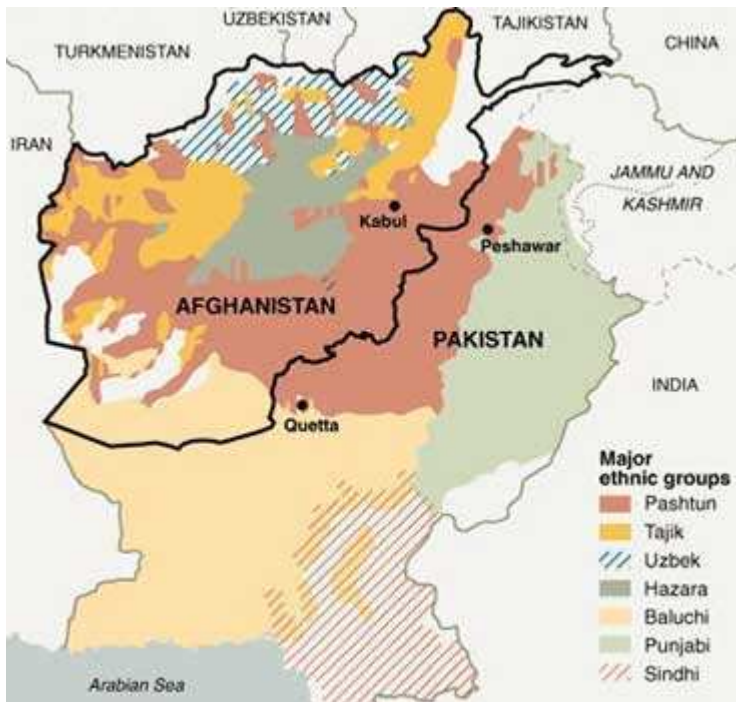


The Endgame in Afghanistan

by Robert Roy Pool



Over the last 2,340 years many powerful empires have conquered and attempted to pacify Afghanistan. None have succeeded for long. This fact alone should make us think carefully about what we imagine we are doing there.

Afghanistan is easy to conquer but impossible to hold. This was true in the time of Alexander the Great, and it is even truer now. Foreign invaders inevitably become embroiled in

Afghanistan's tribal conflicts, favoring some tribes over others and making enemies of the rest. These hardy Afghan tribes – Pashtuns, Uzbeks, Tajiks, Hazaras, Baluchis, Aimaks, Turkmen, and others – are adapted to constant warfare with each other. They quickly reform their alliances to oppose any foreign invader. Even so, foreign occupiers have often been able to sustain their chosen viceroys in Kabul for as long as they are willing to commit the necessary resources.

In times past, once a foreign occupier realized it could not effectively control the Afghan countryside or the lucrative trade routes to China, Iran, and India, its interest invariably waned. There was little else of value in Afghanistan. The cost of assimilating Afghanistan into any empire was therefore high, the benefits negligible. Occupiers have had every incentive to cut their losses and withdraw.

For this simple reason every foreign-backed Afghan regime eventually collapsed in the face of a zealous coalition of native Afghan tribes. Typically, the victorious Afghan coalition then “liberates” Kabul before it dissolves into squabbling and civil war. A new balance of power between

the Afghan tribes eventually emerges, but only after a period of chaos. Each tribe grabs what it can; each warlord takes some of the plunder. In this manner wealth is redistributed from the urban enclaves to the desperately poor countryside.

After the expulsion of a foreign occupier, the process of attracting a new foreign occupier begins almost at once, although it can take centuries before a new foreign empire feels strong enough to undertake the conquest of Afghanistan. By means of this complex historical process, Afghan warlords have learned to profit from the conquest of their country and from the subsequent revolt, collapse, and chaos that inevitably follows.

But this complex process – chaos, invasion, occupation, revolt, expulsion, collapse and chaos again – has prevented Afghanistan from integrating itself into a stable empire or international trading system. This very process has helped keep Afghanistan ignorant and poor for two thousand years.

The Great Game

This is “The Great Game” of Afghanistan. The Afghans excel at it, but most foreigners don’t understand its most fundamental principles. We Americans certainly do not. Like the Soviets before us and the British before them, we have deluded ourselves into believing that the Afghans are buying our ideas and joining our empire. They love us! They want to be like us! They are having elections! They are practically Americans already!

This delusion would be comic if it didn't have such deadly consequences. The Afghans have not suddenly embraced American democracy any more than they suddenly embraced communism in 1979 or the benefits of British rule in the 19th Century. Afghan warlords fight to expel us even as they profit from our presence. Their interests are served if their war against NATO goes on as long as possible, giving the urban enclaves more time to build up wealth. This will make the plunder all the more lucrative when the foreign-backed regime finally collapses.

The New Twist

The 9/11 attacks added a new, exciting twist to this old game. Because the United States had suffered almost 3,000 civilian casualties on 9/11, because Al Queda had been sheltered by the Taliban government of Afghanistan, and because the U.S. and NATO possess the most capable military forces the world has yet seen, our government was highly

motivated to “control” Afghanistan. The result of this desire has been the occupation of Afghanistan by 68,000 American and 38,000 NATO soldiers and marines.

Americans tend to believe they can do anything. This has made it possible for the wily Afghan warlords to suck us into a colossal extortion scheme, perpetrated on a global scale. They have convinced us (and we have convinced ourselves) that we must continue to garrison Afghanistan and spend tens of billions of dollars there or we will suffer another 9/11 attack. We have enlisted all our most trusted allies, even pacifist Germany and ambivalent Canada. We believe we have no choice but to sacrifice more soldiers and marines, and that someday our efforts will produce an Afghanistan that governs itself peacefully, respects the rule of law, and does not harbor terrorists. We are oblivious to the gigantic extortion scheme because can't see past our own ideology. We see Afghanistan as we want it to be, not as it is.

Foreign Occupation... the Major Afghan Industry

Afghanistan is desperately poor, uneducated, violent, and politically unstable. We should not be surprised that foreign military occupation is the only major industry Afghanistan has been able to attract since the Industrial Revolution. The current NATO occupation is by far the most lucrative in Afghanistan's long history because the NATO nations are the world's richest, in a position to spread plenty of cash around. The U.S. will never run out of money. Afghanistan will never run out of young men who want to fight. This occupation could go on forever unless one side or the other rethinks its behavior.

Rethinking behavior is not an Afghan strong suit. Afghans have been locked into the same pattern of political behavior for 2,340 years.

Afghanistan's Past



At no point in its history has Afghanistan enjoyed a strong central government for more than a few decades. The most recent period of stable government – by Afghan standards – was the period from 1933-1973, when one king, Mohammad Zahir Shah, remained on the Afghan throne for 40 years after the assassination of his father. This period of stability was a fluke, however; it had more to do with the weakness and lack of

meddling by Afghanistan's neighbors – Iran, the Soviet Union, China, and the British Imperial Administration of India – than with any sudden burst of good governance in Kabul.

Afghanistan allied itself with the Axis Powers during World War Two, baiting the British and the Soviets to invade, but both had their hands full fighting the Nazis on other fronts. Neither saw much point in overthrowing King Zahir Shah.

The Afghan King was eventually deposed in an Afghani coup in 1973. He lived the next 34 years in Italy. After the collapse of the Taliban Regime he returned to Afghanistan, but he never again wielded political power. He died in 2007. In 1979, six years after the king was deposed, a new foreign military power, the Soviet Union, was finally enticed to attempt another occupation. It was a mistake that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Empire in the 1980s.

The Soviets believed they could turn Afghans into good little communists, just as we now believe we can turn them into good little democrats. The Soviet occupation, like all foreign occupations over the previous 2,310

years, turned out very badly for the foreign invaders. Thousands of lives were lost, billions of rubles were squandered, and all the good little communists were slaughtered after the Soviets withdrew in 1989.

The government that replaced the Soviet-backed government (and preceded the Taliban) was perhaps the weakest in Afghan history. A period of extreme chaos – even by Afghan standards – soon ensued. All significant social institutions in Afghanistan collapsed.



But every Afghan “state” – whether foreign-backed or indigenous – has proven to be among the world’s weakest and most unstable, its influence extending little beyond the city limits of Kabul. The only exception to this general rule

was the Taliban Regime from 1996-2001. Taliban rule was an historical anomaly – strong and utterly oppressive. Not since the Mongols had Afghanistan been enslaved with such fervor. But the Mongols were in some respects more benign than the Taliban. The Mongols didn’t care whether anyone prayed, or how long they grew their beards. Their agenda was limited to rape, murder, and plunder. Once the initial bloodbath of Mongol conquest had passed, Mongols generally ruled with neglect and indifference. The Taliban, in contrast, actually wanted to control people’s minds.

America to the Rescue

Americans love to believe they are different from other peoples – and better! Our social institutions are more resilient. Our Founding Fathers understood human nature so profoundly and designed a political system so flexible and so workable that everyone should adopt it. After all, we’ve gotten good results with it. We are currently the world’s only military superpower and the most important nation in the world in terms of finance, technology, and entertainment. Our model of a democratic political system, an open social system, and a market-oriented economic system was successfully imposed by military force on Western Europe, Japan, and South Korea. It seemed to work pretty well in those places. Later, variations on our system were adopted voluntarily by some

nations in Eastern Europe and many other nations around the globe. American ideas were the ideas that prevailed in the 20th Century. So why can't we impose our ideas on poor Afghanistan?

Social conditions in Afghanistan are totally different than in any of these other places where American-tested ideas, backed by American military force, have been used to restructure societies. To say Afghanistan is "stuck in the Middle Ages" is wildly optimistic. In Afghanistan the Middle Ages have yet to arrive.



Some Americans nevertheless believe we can succeed in Afghanistan where all other conquerors have failed in the past because U.S. military forces are the most capable in history. While it is true that

the U.S. military has unique advantages no other conqueror of Afghanistan has ever enjoyed – advantages like total air supremacy, satellites, laser-guided smart bombs, the best-trained, smartest special forces and marines in history, and stealthy Predator and Reaper drones capable of firing deadly Hellfire missiles with amazing accuracy – none of these advantages is enough to tilt the balance in our favor.

That is because the problems in Afghanistan are not primarily military, but social and economic. In most of the Afghan countryside tribal law is the only law. The last major wave of social change in the rural areas of Afghanistan was the Islamic Conquest more than 1,000 years ago. Afghan tribal traditions are more powerful than American technology.



Afghanistan's literacy rate is estimated at about 28%, among the very lowest in the world, comparable to only a handful of other impoverished nations. Only one in eight Afghan women can read in any language.

Across an area just slightly smaller than the state of Texas, Afghanistan is home to more than 28 million people – about 4 million more than Texas – with a Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of \$22.27 billion according to the CIA. This is about 1/56th as much as Texas.

Afghanistan's Biggest Industry

Interestingly, the cost of maintaining the NATO garrisons in Afghanistan is estimated to be several times greater than Afghanistan's entire GDP. No one knows exactly how much of this money is spent in Afghanistan -- much of it goes to Western military contractors and the families of Western military personnel in their home countries -- but it can be safely assumed that the spending that results from the NATO military presence in Afghanistan is as large or larger than Afghanistan's entire non-military economy. This means that the NATO occupation of Afghanistan is the nation's largest industry.

While Afghanistan has some productive agricultural regions, most Afghan men don't produce anything, nor do they render beneficial services to anyone on a consistent basis. This leaves them with plenty of time to render services to tribal warlords.

Afghanistan's Second Most Important Industry

Tribal warfare is the third most important industry in Afghanistan, after drug trafficking and foreign military occupation. In reality tribal warfare

and trafficking in opium and hashish are actually the same industry, since most of the warlords have a hand in the drug trade. It is widely rumored that President Hamid Karzai's brother has reaped millions for himself and his Pashtun clan by extorting money from the drug lords. By Afghan standards Karzai's extortion racket is not particularly noteworthy. Tribal leaders are expected to grab whatever money they can from whomever they can, and since the Karzai brothers have such powerful friends – the U.S. Administration! – his extortion scheme ought to produce lucrative results.

Afghanistan's Future: Same as the Past

In order to understand the powerful incentives that oppose modern social development in Afghanistan, it is useful to consider the career options of a young Afghan male. If he is lucky, he can practice the trade of his father. If he is luckier still, he can farm in one of the productive agricultural areas, but this is only possible if he can inherit enough land to support a wife and family, and overcome both the wild market swings and the depredations of the local warlord. Since few Afghans are fortunate enough to own productive agricultural land, most young Afghan males must consider other options.

Why not take a job rendering computer tech support, like hundreds of thousands have done in India? This would be an attractive option, except that most Afghan males cannot read or write in any language, most Afghans speak no English at all except for the few words they might have learned from American soldiers, and most Afghans have no computers and no electricity. Most Afghans have no school in which they might learn about computers and electricity, or even just learn to read and write or do simple arithmetic.

The young Afghan male might make a living building roads or houses or hospitals or schools – all of which Afghanistan needs desperately – but most of these noble projects never get off the ground, since funds designated for them are siphoned off by corrupt government officials and greedy warlords, leaving little or nothing to pay the people actually doing the work.

All things considered, serving his local warlord is the most attractive option for the young Afghan male. Looking at the situation rationally, many young Afghan males will continue to decide they are better off with guns in their hands rather than books or tools. This decision, multiplied by millions, means the tribal system will go on just as it has for millennia.

We Americans are clever people. We relentlessly create new technology. Some of it changes the world. But we cannot yet provide that illiterate young man in Afghanistan a better option than becoming a tribal warrior. And unless we can, all our aircraft, satellites, smart bombs, Special Forces, and killer drones aren't going to make much difference to him.



Afghanistan, therefore, is likely to go on living with the same form of social organization it has had for eons – a social organization that revolves around tribal warfare,

drug trafficking, and sucking money out of foreign military occupiers. No matter who seizes power in Kabul or how many elections they manage to steal, these aspects of Afghan life are not likely to change any time soon.

What is to be Done?

Americans and our NATO allies must make a choice. In order to compel real social change we would have to substantially crush the Afghan tribes and their warlords. Are we willing to kill enough Afghans to make that happen? How many would it take? At what point would we begin to win? Is there any way this policy of crushing tribes and killing Afghans could be presented to the American people as an acceptable policy option? Are we willing to behave like Soviet communists in order to modernize Afghanistan?



Not in a million years. If the wholesale slaughter of thousands more Afghans is the price of rapid social change, Americans will not pay it. Neither will our allies. Our military leaders are severely constrained by public opinion. Dead Afghans can be seen on TV; social change cannot. A policy of killing Afghans is morally repugnant, and in a democracy it is not sustainable. This is one of the many lessons we learned in Viet Nam.

We must therefore decide how we can accomplish our most important goals even as we fail to transform Afghan society.

Tribal warriors cannot fight conventional battles with American

forces – air power, armor, firepower, training, and technology make this impossible – so the Taliban must be humiliated by constantly being compelled to fight our way. We must not dissipate our energy by fighting their way – piecemeal in small unit actions scattered all over the country. These tactics will produce many casualties and no practical result.

The Taliban is largely a Pashtun movement. The other tribes never really bought into the Taliban concept, because all its leaders were Pashtun and its funding came out of the Pashtun regions of Pakistan. Only the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan, therefore, are seriously threatened with a renewal of Taliban rule.

It's really not our problem who rules whom in the Afghan countryside. Attempting to occupy and pacify the rural areas of Afghanistan is an unsustainable strategy. Our front-line combat units are very good at killing people. They are not very good at teaching people to read or running generators or acting as a police force in large swaths of sparsely-populated territory. Better to let the Taliban rule in the rural Pashtun regions.



We do have a real interest in destroying any terrorist training camps that may spring up in Taliban areas. But terrorist training camps will not survive as long as Coalition aircraft and drones control the skies. And our killer drones can punish tribal leaders – Taliban or not – who

commit extreme acts of abuse against their own tribesmen. On the other hand, tribal leaders who are tolerant must be tolerated, even if they have ties to the Taliban.

The price for an alliance with Al Qaeda must be set very high. Any tribe found to be harboring Al Qaeda terrorists – suicide bomb-makers and the like – must be dealt with harshly. Al Qaeda threatens Afghans even more than it threatens Americans. Most of Al Qaeda's terrorist acts are perpetrated in-country. All tribes have an incentive to cooperate in keeping the foreign Al Qaeda operatives out of their villages. Those who allow foreign Al Qaeda operatives in their villages will be shown what American armored brigades and regimental combat teams can do.

All the Bribes for all the Tribes

Those tribes who ally with the Coalition, on the other hand, and provide information about foreign Al Qaeda operatives, should receive dollars in cash – courtesy of the CIA. It's a clear choice: briefcases filled with cash for our friends, killer drones and armored brigades for our enemies. This is the best way to win friends and influence Afghanistan.

This new carrot-and-stick approach will not solve the social problems in Afghanistan – nothing will – but it will prevent the Taliban from enslaving the entire country again.

Even with an effective carrot-and-stick strategy, however, the Great Game in Afghanistan will most likely continue as long as any 9/11 witness is still alive, and probably much longer. But sometime in the 21st Century Young Afghan males will have the option of making a living with books, tools, and computers, not just guns, and perhaps Afghan women will have the option of making a living. This transition will take

several generations. The ancient Afghan tribes will not disappear, but they will fight less and work more. Warlords will become a relic of the past, revered by some, feared by many, but old and unlikely to be replaced. The old Afghan way of life will not die out completely, it will just become irrelevant.



Someday the Afghan tribes will no longer practice global extortion. This is the definition of victory in Afghanistan, and it is possible – eventually. Between now and then we are in for a long march.