

The Afghan nightmare: what is to be done?

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A number of harsh realities have to be borne in mind when analysing the Afghan question. First, in spite of five years of ‘pacification’, and \$100 billion poured into the country—often in the shape of bombs—Afghanistan is still number five on the list of the world’s poorest countries. Next, whereas in 2001, and thanks to the Taliban’s anti-drug policy, opium cultivation had been reduced to 8,000 hectares of Afghan territory, today it covers 165,000!¹ There is no more glaring proof of the West’s failure in this land. Last, the appalling fact should not be forgotten that 70 per cent of Afghans suffer from psychiatric problems,² after so many years of war. The heroin and opium available everywhere provide some form of relief for this mental distress: as a result, of a population of 28 million, at least one million are drug addicts.

The state of physical and mental wretchedness of the Afghan people and the West’s failure to provide a solution have to be borne constantly in mind when attempting to make a sound analysis of the future of the world’s most disinherited country.

Why intervene in Afghanistan?

Since 2001 we have had the ‘war against terrorism’ drummed into us. We have been deluged with images of swashbuckling troops, well-fed

¹ According to figures from the UN Office on Drugs and Crime.

² Afghanistan Study and Documentary Research Centre (CEREDAF) *Bulletin*, April 2007, p. 9; interview with Dr Olivier Maguet.

and equipped with priceless materiel, conducting skilful operations against a nebulous thing called 'terrorism'. However, this amorphous entity takes on more definite shape when, as in Iraq or Afghanistan, nationalist sentiment joins hands with inspired religious fanaticism to create a war of liberation against the interventionists who have become invaders. An absurd duel has transpired, that of the sledgehammer against a fly whose constant movement allows it to avoid being crushed.

In late 2001 the Americans decided that the impalpable enemy that had challenged them was to be found in Afghanistan. So they undertook 'a war of revenge', but as always, in their own way. From well-protected bases an incredible armada began to rain bombs on ragged mountain people: with the lack of success that we are aware of but—justification for the intervention?—to the greater benefit of the military-industrial complex. And the unthinkable happened: whereas Osama bin Laden is still running free, the Afghan people, in spite of their immense war-weariness, have progressively taken up arms in fratricidal combat which has once again split them into two camps. And huge sums of money have gone up in the smoke of explosions, leaving fewer resources available to pursue an, at present, illusory pacification.

But from the American standpoint, this would have been little more than a setback of minor consequence if NATO, at American instigation, had not been committed to the fight. It displays the impotence of an organisation confronted by guerrilla warfare but designed, American style, for conventional war. Rather as Napoleon's false allies of the *Grande Armée* of 1812 were obliged to drag themselves as far as Moscow, so the coalition, predominantly European,³ has been obliged, like it or not, and to satisfy America, to conduct a war which is even less of their choosing in that the allies are prevented from intervening in the one area that is of direct concern to them: Afghanistan's production of 90 per cent of the world's supply of heroin, of which Europe consumes the lion's share. But paradoxically, as we shall see, those who are putting the brakes on this aspect of the war are not so much the Americans as the Europeans.

Why this timidity in the anti-drugs war, led by the British, NATO leaders in this domain? Note that every intervention has almost always been, and still is, amazingly timorous. Taking an objective view of this

³ More than 30 of the 37 nations involved.

phenomenon,⁴ it can be seen that, from the Afghan producer to the European consumer, the traffic runs into tens of billions of dollars annually. It generates a number of eminently culpable direct profiteers, but also many indirect beneficiaries who have no sense of guilt. In Istanbul, London, Rome, Paris or on the Côte d'Azur and the Costa Brava, influential financial and commercial institutions have got into the habit of operating with shady money, and have no wish to see this source of revenue dry up. Moreover, the current economic malaise is such that the upset which would follow a head-on assault against opium could be the final straw, leading to chaos. Others would take advantage of the crisis to revert to the *status quo ante*: a sort of clandestine cohabitation with this plague.

Conscious at last of the blind alley down which they have been heading, the Americans have recently nominated an 'Anti-Drugs Coordinator' and are ready to go ahead with aerial chemical spraying of the crops—the only effective eradication method until a variety of biological products arrive. Curiously enough, resistance to this forthright operation comes from the Europeans, notably the British, who have pressed President Karzai not to authorise 'chemical warfare'. Their argument is that it would be better to buy the opium resin from the farmers, for use by the pharmaceutical industry, even if that means destroying a large part of the crop. And while that quarrel rumbles on, typical of NATO scruples, a record harvest is growing.

Is such a situation of 'non-war' against drugs a viable one? Less and less so. Whilst internally it is financing the Taliban's war, externally it is contaminating neighbouring countries by transforming them into narco-states, riddled with corruption and under mafia control. Judging by the state of some city suburbs in the West, it is worth asking whether the fast-growing drug cancer is not starting to spread its ganglions into Europe.

No doubt therefore that a real fight against drugs from Afghan sources would be the best justification for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operations in Afghanistan. But at the same time it would prolong the war, intensify it, make it more bitter. Does the Atlantic Alliance have the resources, the patience, and, frankly, the strength of character needed for such an undertaking?

⁴ An explanation of internal factors was given in last month's article, 'The Afghan nightmare: an update' in the paragraph headed 'A fatal mistake: the revival of opium cultivation'.

First scenario: an alternative form of intervention

Without having to use chemical means, obviously dangerous, eradication is achievable if it is tackled energetically with the support of a resolute Afghan government and the 100,000 men of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Police, currently being retrained. After all, wasn't this type of operation successful in the two years from 1999 to 2001, when the Taliban themselves set about the fight against this plague in the name of the Koran's teachings? They were ruthless in their pursuit of this goal: the poppy cultivators were threatened with the death penalty, and public executions took place. As a result, after 2001 the zone controlled by the Taliban was producing practically no opium at all.

Destroying the laboratories and their stocks is a harder task, since both are hidden within the villages. Air strikes could not really be 'surgical'. There would be a lot of collateral damage in what would become a merciless war. Nonetheless, the narcotics production chain could be rapidly destroyed, and within two years stockpiles would slump.

This type of operation would require the 15,000 European soldiers to move out of their fortified camps in which, like the 27,000 Americans, they shut themselves, allowing the rebels to control more than half the territory: 11,000 soldiers in Bagram, 8,000 in Kandahar, as many again in Kabul, Jallalabad and so on, are kicking their heels inside support bases that are more or less surrounded. Apart from these 'logisticians', allegedly needed in the bases, the number of troops capable of deployment on the ground does not exceed 15,000, which is patently inadequate. With 25,000 genuine combat troops, the force should be split into small garrisons of 200 to 300 men, supported by ANA units, in every 'hot' district of the southern half of the country. Air support could be intensified and the right of hot pursuit by heli-borne troops extended, especially into the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, a notorious sanctuary for the rebels. Simultaneously, farmers who had lost their main source of revenue could be compensated and helped in the cultivation of other crops.

Progressive adaptation could be a reasonable expectation, by asking the World Trade Organisation to make a provisional grant to Afghanistan of the maximum quota of legal opium production intended for the pharmaceutical industry.

Purely military action would be accompanied by a vast economic workshop to rehabilitate the economy and society, and here priority should be given to NGOs: this would avoid the role-mixing that we can see on the ground today, where soldiers are diverted towards tasks which have little to do with their primary mission and detract from their training.

This is the price that will have to be paid for a restoration of order that holds out some promise of success. The cost need not be excessively high, since a determination made manifest from the outset should lead to an eventual decrease in the astronomical cost of weapons and munitions.⁵ But would the military-industrial complex resign itself to losing that godsend?

The duration of the pacification phase is a factor that could be of concern to the Atlantic Alliance. In Morocco, it took Lyautey thirteen years of tenacious efforts, with many fits and starts and culminating in 1925 in the Rif War! Undoubtedly in Afghanistan, with the country riddled with corruption on every side, it would be necessary to devote at least as much time, and ferocious energy, to restoring security.

Are we up to that sort of sustained effort? Not easily, since in democracies policy is subject to periodic review, and can stay on course for only a few years at best.

Given the seriousness of the problem, are we capable of determined, violent action, using extreme measures? European resistance to the use of chemical methods indicates a scrupulousness that is, to say the least, disarming.

Could we set in train a massive humanitarian aid programme in Afghanistan even although the risks to the lives of those involved would be considerable? Military action in close contact with the Taliban would attract a few of the most battle-hardened volunteers, but would they be sufficient in number, and free to act?

Finally, is the Afghan government of today capable of giving its full backing to an eradication policy? Corruption, considered by the Afghans themselves to be the worst the country has known for 30 years,⁶ has even spread into the President's entourage. In these circumstances how could Afghan soldiers and policemen intervene when their superi-

⁵ At the request of the Canadian contingent, under Taliban pressure, tanks were airlifted from the United States to Afghanistan!

⁶ According to a study by Integrity Watch Afghanistan, reported in the *CEDERAF Bulletin* of April 2007, p. 10.

ors, 'bought' by the traffickers, would be doing everything they could to stop or divert them?

Given the serious nature of these questions, it is legitimate to look for an alternative to the intervention suggested above, however justifiable it might be.

Second scenario: NATO withdrawal and its replacement by other forces

The frightening threat of a NATO withdrawal deserves to be brandished, in that it is the only way in which Afghans in power might be less willing to be 'bought' by the traffickers, and better able to fight against them. The power vacuum created could lead to a civil war situation and, with the intervention of neighbours, could even lead to the break-up of the country.

Such a development would not result in any reduction in opium cultivation, quite the contrary. It would therefore be desirable, although not essential,⁷ for the Atlantic Alliance to maintain a protection role by setting up bases in Turkestan. The West could at the same time cover the region's important energy resources. The elements of such redeployment already exist in key countries like Kyrgyzstan with the Manas base, in Tajikistan where the French Air Force is installed in Dushanbe, and Uzbekistan where the Germans have a rescue base at Termez. Similarly, after the pullback of the Russian frontier guards, there was a tentative operation to seal the northern Afghan frontiers under American and European auspices, particularly in Tajikistan. This re-establishment of NATO in Central Asia would, moreover, offer greater freedom to intervene in Afghanistan, for aerial chemical treatment of the poppy fields, for example. It could also give Europe the chance to renew some common links with Russia, which suffers as much as the rest of us from the drugs phenomenon.

If NATO were to give up its presence in Afghanistan, it would put a number of Asian countries on the spot, notably those that participate in the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This new and vig-

⁷ The drug war can still be waged by intelligence services up to the frontiers of the European Union, and then by police forces within member states.

orous body⁸ brings together all Afghanistan's neighbours with the exception of Turkmenistan: China, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan as member states, Iran and Pakistan as observers. It is worth noting, by the way, that its proximity, together with its anti-terrorist concerns, makes an SCO intervention in Afghanistan more viable than a NATO one, from its greater distance.

All the SCO member or even observer states are concerned in the first instance by the drug traffic issue: in spite of all their reticence over intervention, they could not, after NATO's departure, tolerate for very long the emergence of a 'grey zone', more than ever committed to narcotics production and liable to offer refuge to terrorist groups inclined towards subversion on Afghanistan's periphery: particularly in Sinkiang (China), in Pashtunistan and Baluchistan (Pakistan). China, which is likely to become a major target for the drug traffickers, already appears to be extremely interested in Afghanistan. Hasn't it restored a highway in Tajikistan which gives it direct access via Murgab and Khorog to eastern Afghanistan? For its part, Russia, absent in recent years—for good reason—would like to renew its links, at least economic ones, with Kabul. Finally, an SCO country which is not often mentioned but which has great potential, could play a certain role on Afghan soil, if only to display its new capabilities. This is Kazakhstan, whose journalists have been displaying a great deal of interest in the only truly Asiatic ethnic group in Afghanistan, the Hazaras. All of which goes to show that the SCO could hardly do other than replace NATO in Afghanistan, if that became necessary. The fact that the Chinese, the SCO leaders, could as a result come to replace Americans on Afghan soil should give pause for thought in Kabul, since the newcomers would certainly not be concerned by the scruples and constraints of the Atlantic Alliance.

In the final analysis, if the drugs war does not become NATO's primary concern, that organisation is wasting its time, money and resources, and might just as well go away, since it will be replaced. Unless of course it is seized with pity for the Afghan people. The Alliance's departure would smell of abandonment: it would immediately

⁸ Created in 1996, the SCO includes China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India, Iran, Mongolia and Pakistan are observer nations. Initially an organisation concerned with security, it multiplied its anti-terrorist declarations and manoeuvres before widening its area of interest to include economic issues.

presage appalling suffering for an exhausted population already overwhelmed by hardship.