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Afghanistan: The Consolidation of a Rogue State

Afghanistan has gone from one of Washington's greatest foreign policy triumphs to one of its most profound failures. During the Cold War, U.S. support to the anti-Soviet Afghan resistance resulted in a debacle for Moscow, humiliating the vaunted Red Army and discrediting the Soviets throughout the Muslim world. After the Soviets withdrew, however, Afghanistan has become a disaster for U.S. policy. The master terrorist 'Usama bin Laden has taken shelter in Afghanistan, using it as a base to indoctrinate and train militants who strike at the United States and its allies. Afghan women face a horrifying array of restrictions, among the most repressive in the world. The country is now the world's leading producer of opium, which in turn is used to produce heroin. These problems, however, are only symptoms of a more dangerous disease. Though policymakers are loathe to say it openly, Afghanistan is ruled by a rogue regime, the Taliban. The outrages that draw headlines in the West stem from its misrule and will continue as long as the movement dominates Afghanistan. If anything, the danger is growing. "Talibanism"—a radical, backward, and repressive version of Islam similar to the Saudi "Wahhabi" credo but rejected by the vast majority of Muslims worldwide—is gaining adherents outside Afghanistan and spreading to other countries in the region.

Acting now is essential. The Taliban has consolidated its influence in Afghanistan over the last five years. Soon the movement will be too strong to turn away from rogue behavior. It will gain more influence with insurgents,

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terrorists, and narcotics traffickers and spread its abusive ideology throughout the region.

Unfortunately, the Clinton administration has ignored the challenge of the Taliban. Some administration officials tacitly favored the group when it emerged between 1994 and 1995, underestimating the threat it posed to regional stability and to U.S. interests. Officials in the State Department and other concerned bureaucracies have too few resources with which to oppose the movement. Their admonitions have little influence with regional states or the Taliban. More important, they operate in a policy vacuum. U.S. concerns about human rights, drugs, and terrorism are not coordinated as part of an overall strategy for protecting U.S. interests in the region. Afghanistan policy drifts according to the political concerns of the moment, without a comprehensive strategy to guide our actions.

Protecting U.S. interests and stopping the spread of “Talibanism” require confronting the Taliban and preventing it from consolidating power. Alternatives to confrontation have little promise. Continued neglect leaves the United States with little influence over the Taliban. Washington must weaken the Taliban, support moderate Afghans, and press Afghanistan’s neighbors, particularly Pakistan, to work against extremism in the region. Once the Taliban is weaker, it will be more amenable to peaceful resolution of the civil war, adhering to international norms regarding the treatment of women and minorities, and refraining from supporting radicalism abroad. Success, however, requires elevating the importance of Afghanistan at home, ensuring that the U.S. policy is coordinated and has sufficient resources.

What Happened?

The transformation of Afghanistan from policy success to failure stems from two related causes: an overestimation of Soviet power during the Cold War and an underestimation of U.S. interests after the Soviets withdrew.

Washington, assuming that the Soviet Union would ultimately prevail after they invaded the country in 1979, began its support for the Afghan *mujahedin*—the Muslim guerrillas opposing Soviet occupation. The United States sought to bleed the Soviets, forcing them to pay a heavy price for their aggression. To this end, the United States aided radical fundamentalists along with more traditional forces and encouraged Arab and Islamic states to support their own anti-Soviet proxies. The implications for a post-Soviet Afghanistan were not considered. After all, our enemy’s enemy was our friend.

But then our enemy departed. With the Soviets gone, the United States saw little reason to focus on this poor and distant land. We left our erstwhile

friends to their own devices, assuming that their squabbles and actions would remain confined to the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan.

As the United States departed, a vicious civil war spread throughout the country. Once the Soviet-backed regime fell, war, anarchy, and fragmentation followed. The conflict became increasingly one of ethnic and sectarian groups, particularly Pashtuns, Tajiks, Uzbeks, and the Shi'a Hazaras. Without the glue of the common enemy, the opposition turned their guns on one another. During the battle for Kabul from 1992 to 1996, every major group had both allied with and fought against every other major group at one time or another. In many other parts of the country, warlords ruled. The war also became a proxy war between Iran and Pakistan, with each power backing different factions.

With Pakistan's support, the Taliban (Islamic Student) movement emerged in 1994. The movement began in Kandahar and consisted of disgruntled former mujahedin and students of Islamic studies from schools located in Pakistan along the Afghan border. In August 1998, the Taliban gained control over the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif, effectively relegating its remaining opponents to the country's hinterlands. This victory came after years of hard fighting in which the Taliban first consolidated control over the Pashtun heartland and then conquered more ethnically mixed areas, starting in Herat in western Afghanistan and then taking Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan and the capital Kabul. The Taliban now controls almost all entry points into Afghanistan and the lion's share of the country's lucrative opium crop.

Despite these victories, the Taliban faces considerable opposition within Afghanistan. Pashtuns, the dominant ethnic group in Afghanistan, support the Taliban for now. They welcome a respite to the seemingly endless civil war, preferring the Taliban's harsh order to no order at all. In addition, most Pashtuns see the Taliban's control as an expression of their community's dominance. Despite this pride and desire for order, many Pashtuns oppose its harsh ideology. Many Afghans regard it as an essentially foreign movement, a product of the refugee camps in Pakistan rather than of traditional Afghan values. Traditional Afghans also oppose many of the Taliban's radical social changes. Non-Pashtun ethnic groups resent Pashtun dominance and thus are lukewarm supporters of the Taliban at best. Opposition is particularly high in urban areas, where many residents resent the Taliban's harsh form of Islamic law.

Afghanistan has become a disaster for U.S. policy.

The Regional Dimension

In addition to internal Afghan dynamics, rivalries among Afghanistan's neighbors worsen the struggle in Afghanistan and complicate efforts to restore stability to the region. Pakistan is the worst offender. By supporting the Afghan resistance to the Soviet occupation, Islamabad gained considerable influence in Afghanistan. Beginning in 1994, Pakistan has armed the Taliban, provided it with military advisers and intelligence, and helped supply the movement. Perhaps more importantly, the Taliban learned their extreme beliefs in Pakistani *madrasas* (religious schools). Without Pakistani aid, the Taliban would not have been able to score some important initial victories and to sustain its subsequent drive to take over the rest of the country.

Islamabad has a wide range of interests in Afghanistan. Pakistan sees a friendly government in Kabul as essential to its national security. Given the ongoing hostility of New Delhi, Islamabad requires a secure northwestern border and, if possible, "strategic depth" for basing its forces in the event of a conflict. Pakistan also sees a friendly government in Afghanistan as a bridge to the markets and energy reserves of Central Asia. In addition to these economic and geostrategic reasons, the Taliban enjoys considerable support from Pakistan's military and intelligence services and among Pakistan's strong Sunni Islamist community. Furthermore, Pakistan's new government, which took power in a coup in October 1999, may prove even more supportive of the Taliban.

Iran, which like Pakistan gained influence in Afghanistan because of the struggle against the Soviets, is bitterly opposed to both the Taliban and to growing Pakistani influence. To maintain influence in Afghanistan, Iran has tried to organize and unite Afghanistan's Shi'a population and has provided a range of anti-Taliban forces with money, supplies, and arms. Afghanistan's Shi'a, however, are only lukewarm in their support for Iran and often resent Tehran's meddling.

Iran's hostility toward and rivalry with the Taliban is fierce. Many Taliban leaders regard Afghanistan's Shi'a, and the Iranian regime that champions their cause, as apostates. Thus, as the Taliban has consolidated control in Shi'a areas, it has often ruthlessly tried to suppress Shi'ism and regularly discriminates against Shi'as. In part because of this abuse, Iran has worked closely with other anti-Taliban forces in an attempt to stop the Taliban's consolidation of power and even massed troops along Afghanistan's border last year. Although Americans shed few tears for Tehran, this development highlights a new truth: if Iran's revolutionary ardor continues to wane, it will be the Taliban that represents the face of Islamic radicalism.

Several of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia also are playing a major role in Afghanistan's politics. Both Uzbekistan and Tajikistan are concerned that the Taliban might sponsor Islamic radicalism in their countries. They have provided transit routes for arms and supplies to what is left of the Northern Alliance, a collection of anti-Taliban forces that has steadily lost ground to the Taliban and controls roughly 10 percent of the country, including the Tajik-populated Panjsher Valley, much of Takhar and Badakhshan, and parts of the Hazarajat, where Afghanistan's Shi'a Muslim community lives. Tajikistan has served as a base for arming the Taliban's foes, with both Russia and Iran working with it to aid their Afghan allies. The recent loss of airbases by Northern Alliance forces has made Tajikistan more important. For several years, Uzbekistan backed Abdul Rashid Dostum, an ethnic Uzbek whose territory the Taliban overran in 1997 to 1998.

Moscow has played a limited but important role in Afghanistan in recent years. After the fall of its crony regime led by Najibullah, Russia reduced its involvement in the country. During the civil war in Tajikistan from 1992 to 1993, however, Russia returned to the region. Moscow has tried to capitalize on instability, real and imagined, portraying itself as the protector of Central Asia against the menace of Islamic radicalism. It has worked with the Central Asian states to provide arms and supplies to anti-Taliban forces. Russia has at times led an international diplomatic campaign to isolate the Taliban, pressing its case at the United Nations and in other international fora.

The many states that meddle in Afghanistan complicate any peace settlement and will lead to continued war and instability. Although the Taliban has defeated its foes for now, the readiness of Iran, Russia, and other states to aid its foes suggests that war and instability will continue in the coming years.

Afghanistan has proven an obstacle to the development of the region.

Why Should We Care?

Afghanistan is important to the United States for a range of strategic, moral, economic, and historic reasons. Afghanistan is a haven for some of the world's most lethal anti-U.S. terrorists and their supporters. Bin Laden is only the most famous of a large and skilled network of radicals based in Afghanistan. Owing to Taliban tolerance, the network Bin Laden helped create flourishes in Afghanistan, where terrorists have a place to train, forge

connections, and indoctrinate others.

Instability in Afghanistan has spread outside its borders. Many terrorists in Saudi Arabia and Muslim extremists in the West received training in Afghanistan. These extremists have caused violence and instability in Lebanon, the Balkans, the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and other parts of the world where U.S. interests are engaged. They pose a threat to U.S. soldiers and civilians at home and abroad, to the Middle East peace process, and to the stability of our allies in the region.

Why not extend an olive branch to the Taliban?

An alarming recent trend is the spread of “Talibanism” to Pakistan. Islamic societies espousing the Taliban’s extreme policies are gaining influence throughout Pakistan, including in the security services and armed forces. The Taliban hosts extremist Sunni groups that have killed hundreds of Pakistani Shi’a and even tried to assassinate moderate Pakistani leaders.¹ Many of the militants who invaded

Indian-controlled Kashmir in May 1999 were trained in Afghanistan. Although the Taliban does not control Pakistan today, the prospect of a nuclear-armed Pakistan adopting the credo of the Taliban, while unlikely, is simply too risky to ignore. Forces tied to the Taliban and to bin Laden are also gaining influence in Central Asia and are active in ongoing conflicts in Kashmir, Tajikistan, Chechnya, and Dagestan.

Afghanistan also is a major exporter of drugs, to Europe and increasingly to the United States. Afghanistan is the world’s largest producer of opium—and the Taliban has done nothing to stop this. Money from the drug trade finances the Taliban, helping to ensure their control over the country. Drug money has also enabled the Taliban to gain influence in Pakistan and other neighboring countries, buying off local officials who might otherwise police the border. Legitimate commerce has suffered as the drug trade has undermined the authority of government and social institutions.

Afghanistan has also become a major center for smuggling, particularly for arms. Such smuggling not only hinders the development of any legitimate economic activity in Afghanistan, it also destabilizes Afghanistan’s already troubled neighbors. Legitimate merchants in Pakistan in particular suffer from smuggling in Afghanistan. More ominously, Islamic extremists and other radicals can purchase a wide array of arms in Afghanistan and use it in their struggles in other parts of the region.

In addition to these more immediate concerns, Afghanistan itself occupies a vital geostrategic position, near such critical but unstable regions as the Persian Gulf and the Indo-Pakistani border. Indeed, the importance of Afghani-

stan may grow in the coming years, as Central Asia's oil and gas reserves, which are estimated to rival those of the North Sea, begin to play a major role in the world energy market. Afghanistan could prove a valuable corridor for this energy as well as for access to markets in Central Asia. In addition, Afghanistan can serve as a trade link between Central and South Asia. Instead, Afghanistan has proven an obstacle to the development of this region, as outside investors fear the strife that emanates from Afghanistan.

Finally, the United States has deep humanitarian interests in Afghanistan. The infant mortality rate in Afghanistan is the highest in the world. More than two million Afghan refugees live in Pakistan and Iran, destabilizing Pakistan and constituting an ongoing tragedy in both of these countries. Afghanistan's infrastructure has been destroyed. The educated classes for the most part have either been killed or have left the country. Because of the lack of modern schools and the Taliban's policies, Afghan children receive little education, undermining the prospects for future economic development.

Afghan women bear much of the suffering. Before the Taliban took power, Afghan women played an important part in Afghanistan's public life. Today, however, they face numerous restrictions. In cities under its control, the Taliban has placed strict curbs on the role of women outside their home. Except in rare circumstances, women are not allowed to work or to interact with males who are not relatives. In violation of Islamic precepts, the Taliban has limited school education for girls. Amnesty International reports that fear of punishment has prevented many Afghan women and girls from seeking education and that the Taliban has ordered the closure of home schools that educate Afghan girls. Female-headed households often do not receive Taliban-controlled assistance, leading to malnutrition and even starvation. Women's health care is poor, leading to high infant-mortality rates, among other problems.

The Dangers of Neglect

So far, the United States has taken few steps to secure its interests in Afghanistan and the region. Most U.S. efforts are confined to ad hoc measures to appease domestic critics concerned with terrorism or the treatment of women. Although limited involvement reduces U.S. exposure, it poses grave dangers.

Most obviously, continued neglect is likely to result in Afghanistan remaining a base of operation for some of the most violent terrorists in the world. The question of bin Laden illustrates the limits of U.S. policy. Clearly, bin Laden is a dangerous terrorist who must be captured and prosecuted. Yet

the U.S. focus on him, rather than on the trend he represents, is misguided. Bin Laden is a wealthy, capable, and dedicated foe, but hardly an evil genius or charismatic leader who single-handedly is waging war against the United States. If he dies, the war will continue. As one Taliban officer noted, "What will the Americans do even if they find bin Laden? There are hundreds of Bin Ladens just up the road."² Indeed, the U.S. focus on Bin Laden has enabled him to increase his recruitment and fund-raising from abroad. Stopping the type of terrorism Bin Laden champions requires gaining the support of governments worldwide. If he and others like him have a haven to proselytize and train their followers, violence will flourish. To stop Bin Laden's network, Washington must gain the support of the governments that host it. As long as the Taliban's radical leadership remains in power, however, a true crackdown is not likely.

Indeed, Afghanistan may become an even more grievous source of regional instability. The Taliban has already hosted training camps for fighters who have spread radicalism to Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Xinjiang, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere. A lack of U.S. involvement may allow the Taliban to intensify this support and perhaps spread its extremist interpretation of Islam to other countries. Perhaps most worrisome, the Taliban might further increase its already considerable influence in Pakistan, leading that state to become hostile to the United States.

Narcotics trafficking also would continue. The Taliban has ignored U.S. and international calls to crack down on the drug trade and appear unmoved by traditional means of pressure, such as cuts in aid or sanctions. The Taliban have evinced little concern for the good works of humanitarian relief agencies, and, as much of Afghanistan's economy involves smuggling, sanctions mean little. More muscular forms of pressure are necessary to influence the Taliban.

Neglect would also allow the appalling human rights and humanitarian problems of Afghanistan to fester. The Taliban has freely ignored human rights admonitions from the United States, other Western countries, and the United Nations, correctly perceiving that the suffering of women or the Shi'a carries little immediate penalty. Moreover, they have interfered with the delivery and administration of international humanitarian relief and economic development programs. These problems are likely to continue in the absence of U.S. pressure.

The Dream of Engagement

If continued neglect is so risky, why not extend an olive branch to the Taliban? Pragmatists seeking to avoid a confrontation might consider

working with the Taliban given its ascendancy. On the surface, such a policy seems sensible: regardless of the claims of other Afghan groups, the Taliban is the dominant power in Afghanistan today. By working with it even more closely, Washington might make it a more responsible power and perhaps lead it to renounce support for terrorism and to improve its human rights record.

As part of an engagement strategy, the United States and the international community would offer the Taliban a range of inducements to encourage it to act more responsibly. The United States, the UN, or other interested powers could sponsor a donors' conference to assist in Afghanistan's reconstruction. The international community could also support relief organizations, offer development loans, and otherwise try to foster humanitarian and economic objectives. Aid would be used to encourage the Taliban to initiate more moderate policies and to reward the Taliban if it stayed the course. The United States might also offer to support turning over the Afghan seat at the UN to the Taliban.

The only problem with engagement is that it is not likely to work. Despite its superficial pragmatism, a closer look reveals that engagement would do little to subdue the Taliban. Indeed, given the Taliban's intransigence it could even backfire, encouraging Taliban radicalism. There is little reason to expect the Taliban to renounce radicalism in exchange for ties to Washington. As have other Islamic radicals in the past, the Taliban's leaders have shown little regard for Washington or the West's good opinion. If they consolidated power, they might actually increase meddling abroad, as have other revolutionary regimes in the past.

Human rights abuses and narcotics production also might increase. As the Taliban has consolidated its control over Afghanistan, its restrictions on women, abuse of the Shi'a, and other human rights transgressions have grown. Opium production also has increased in the last year. In response to UN and U.S. protests, the Taliban has denounced outside interference and made no concessions. Engagement might lead it to conclude that it can continue human rights abuses with no penalty.

Even if engagement would lead to Taliban concessions, it would have no support at home. No administration could make unilateral concessions to the Taliban until it Taliban makes progress on women's rights, narcotics, and terrorism. Until then, any efforts toward conciliation will be rejected by the U.S. Congress and politically active U.S. citizens.

The Taliban's most dangerous potential enemy is itself.

A Strategy for Transformation

Unfortunately, the challenge of Afghanistan cannot be solved through neglect or conciliation. Most immediately, Washington must weaken the Taliban; only then will it accept a negotiated political settlement and adopt more humane policies at home and more responsible ones abroad. Over time, the United States should also encourage a new leadership in Afghanistan, one more in accord with U.S. regional interests and with the long-term aspirations of the Afghan people. This will enable Washington to meet its long-term objective of a negotiated settlement to the Afghan conflict that brings together important Afghan actors and accords with the interests of regional powers.

As part of this strategy, Washington should take the following six steps:

(1) *Change the balance of power.* Facts on the ground, rather than UN resolutions and international conferences, are what determine the behavior of the Taliban and other factions in Afghanistan. Preventing the Taliban from consolidating control over all of the country is a necessary precondition toward moderating its policies. Until the Taliban's leaders realize they cannot win on the ground, they will not respect U.S. and international demands regarding terrorism, human rights, and other concerns.

To create a military stalemate, the United States should offer existing foes of the Taliban assistance. The Taliban's opponents, however, are currently too weak to dramatically change the balance of power in Afghanistan. The anti-Taliban Northern Alliance controls only limited swaths of remote territories.

Any lasting solution to the Afghan conflict requires working with the Pashtun population; too close a relationship with the Northern Alliance will hinder rather than help this objective.

The Taliban's most dangerous potential enemy is itself. For U.S. strategy to be successful, Washington must emphasize efforts to reduce Pashtun support for the Taliban. Such an emphasis is highly feasible given the lukewarm backing the Taliban has in Afghanistan. Most Afghans, including most Pashtuns, do not support the Taliban's harsh version of Islam and oppose the influence Pakistan has gained in their country. Moreover, many traditional forces resent the Taliban's usurpation of their leading social and political positions. Thus, Washington should seek to fracture the Taliban internally, a step that goes beyond simply supporting the Taliban's existing foes. The most useful allies for the United States are members of the Pashtun community who are willing to oppose the Taliban. If Pashtun support for the Taliban can be reduced, the movement will weaken considerably.

Efforts by Iran, Russia, China, and other regional states to oppose the

Taliban should also be encouraged, if discreetly. U.S. relations with these states are often strained. Russia and China are increasingly suspicious of U.S. hegemony, and Tehran has long opposed U.S. influence in the region. Yet in Afghanistan at least, a common threat can unite these strange bedfellows. Iran, Russia, and China all fear the Taliban's brand of Islamic radicalism—the Taliban has directly or indirectly supported radicals opposed to all three countries—and would consider *de facto* cooperation with a serious U.S. strategy to counter the movement. Indeed, as unrest grows in Chechnya and Dagestan, Moscow may recognize the importance of better relations with the United States on the issue of Afghanistan. If Iran becomes more moderate in its policies in the coming years, Afghanistan also might become a source of closer U.S.-Iranian relations. Closer coordination would make U.S. efforts more effective while requiring few U.S. resources.

The United States should press Pakistan to reduce its support for the Taliban.

(2) *Oppose the Taliban's ideology.* It is not enough to oppose the Taliban on the ground; the ideas that they advocate must be opposed as well. If anything, "Talibanism" is more dangerous than the Taliban, particularly if it spreads to Pakistan and Central Asia. Washington should expand the Voice of America's Dari and Pashtu broadcasts to Afghanistan, providing air time to the Taliban's opponents. Washington should also help more moderate Islamic scholars express their message.

(3) *Press Pakistan to withdraw its support.* As the Taliban's most important sponsor, Pakistan bears a responsibility for its misdeeds and can play an important role in transforming the movement. Ideally, Islamabad would support Washington's anti-Taliban campaign, using its influence and contacts to weaken the Taliban and encourage a more moderate leadership. More realistically, the United States should press Pakistan to reduce its support for the Taliban. Pressing Islamabad now is essential, as its new military leadership consolidates power and seeks to gain the goodwill of the United States.

Pakistan is vulnerable both politically and economically. The October 1999 coup has left the new leadership with few friends abroad. Its recent nuclear and missile testing and support for radicals in Kashmir have generated criticism throughout the world. Economic pressure, whether applied through the UN or by major economic powers such as the United States, can be particularly effective, as its economy is in a shambles. Washington must play hardball. Although Pakistan has long been an ally of the United States, its policies in Afghanistan are directly opposed to U.S. interests. The

United States should make it clear that it will tilt toward India if Pakistan continues to back the Taliban.

(4) *Aid the victims of the Taliban.* Confrontation carries with it a price. If the United States supports the Taliban's opponents, the misery of Afghanistan's people will continue and may even increase. Modest amounts of aid, however, can help alleviate suffering in Afghanistan. Aid should focus on particularly troubled religious and ethnic communities and on fostering education and health care for Afghan women. But aid must be linked to overall U.S. goals. As long as the Taliban restricts aid workers and channels aid money according to its needs, the United States is only likely to strengthen the Taliban's grip on power. If the Taliban controls external aid, it gains a new source of money and legitimacy. Thus, aid should be conditional on the Taliban moderating its policies or, more realistically for the near-term, should be sent to areas outside the Taliban's control or channeled through the Taliban's opponents. Humanitarian aid should be used to weaken the Taliban when possible and, at the very least, not bolster its position.

(5) *Support moderate Afghans.* It is not enough to tear down the Taliban. Washington must also create an alternative to their leadership in the long-term. In addition to supporting anti-Taliban forces in general, the United States should try to strengthen moderate forces in the Afghan community. One lesson of past U.S. support for Afghan mujahedin is that this support cannot be indiscriminate. Washington should fund Afghans who oppose not just the Taliban but also "Talibanism," helping them organize politically and providing them with funding to spread their anti-Taliban message. Support should go far beyond backing the remnants of the Northern Alliance, whose leaders have an unimpressive track record in their previous governance of parts of Afghanistan. Although there are few important Afghan leaders who would embrace U.S. ideals and goals, both traditional forces that the Taliban displaced and many members of the Afghan diaspora oppose "Talibanism." A strict condition of U.S. support is to avoid working with any leaders involved in narcotics trafficking or terrorism.

Strengthening moderate forces would represent a tremendous step forward. If the Taliban declines in influence, a power vacuum might ensue. Narcotics traffickers and terrorists may find a home in Afghanistan as long as there is no strong force able to replace the Taliban. Washington should thus try to create a movement that eventually can act as an accountable government in order to prevent the Taliban's fall from plunging Afghanistan into dangerous chaos.

As part of the effort to bolster moderate Afghans, the United States should lend its support to the convening of a traditional Afghan grand as-

sembly for resolving the Afghan conflict and for the selection of a broadly acceptable transitional government. Such an assembly, a *Loya Jirgha*, would help bring together Afghans of different tribal, religious, and ethnic backgrounds and foster a common Afghan identity. The former king of Afghanistan—who retains considerable support among both Pashtuns and non-Pashtuns—has proposed the convening of such an assembly and could serve as a source of unity. Taliban opposition to such an assembly will increase resistance to the movement among the Pashtuns.

(6) *Elevate the importance of Afghanistan at home.* To implement the above changes, Afghanistan must receive more attention in Washington. Currently, Afghanistan policy involves a host of regional and functional elements of the bureaucracy involving terrorism, human rights, nuclear proliferation, and regional issues. The Clinton administration should appoint a high-level envoy for Afghanistan who can coordinate overall U.S. policy. The envoy must have sufficient stature and access to ensure that he or she is taken seriously in foreign capitals and by local militias. Equally important, the special envoy must be able to shape Afghanistan policy within U.S. bureaucracies.

The shift from neglect to confrontation will require a substantial change in U.S. policy but will not require a massive outlay of resources. The United States will not have to use its military forces, and the necessary reconstruction aid and other financial inducements are limited given that the poverty of the region makes even modest U.S. contributions desirable to all potential partners. Indeed, Washington will be able to draw on the diplomatic and other resources of Russia, China, and various Central Asian states, as they all share U.S. concerns over the Taliban's consolidation of power. Thus, given the threat posed the Taliban's Afghanistan, the resources necessary for the strategy suggested here are modest indeed.

The key change is a political one. Washington must exercise leadership in order to bring stability to Afghanistan and the region. Continued neglect will only lead to further chaos and violence and pose a growing threat to U.S. interests.

Confronting the Taliban now, before it can consolidate power, is necessary if we are to meet the challenges posed by the next rogue regime. The above six steps are strategically necessary, morally desirable, and politically feasible. A wide array of U.S. and regional security and humanitarian interests should compel Washington to play a more assertive role in Afghanistan

If the Taliban controls external aid, it gains a new source of money and legitimacy.

and the region. A failure to act will lead the Taliban to continue, and probably expand, its rogue behavior, creating even more dangerous problems in the years to come.

Notes

1. For more on the Taliban's role in Pakistan, see Adam Garfinkle, "Afghanistanding," *Orbis* (Summer 1999), pp. 412-414.
2. As quoted in Ahmed Rashid, "Afghanistan: Heart of Darkness," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, August 5, 1999 (electronic version).