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Is rebuilding Afghanistan our mission impossible?

A former British diplomat and our present ambassador in Kabul clash over what we have achieved and what more can be done

Rory Stewart and Sherard Cowper-Coles

YES Rory Stewart, a former diplomat, lives in Kabul where he is running an urban regeneration project

BRITAIN is putting more resources and energy into Afghanistan than into almost any other country in the world. It plans to create a safe, democratic and prosperous Afghanistan and has taken particular responsibility for fighting drugs and the insurgency in the province of Helmand. But what is the chance of success?

Some things have been achieved in the six years since the US led invasion, from getting millions of girls back into school to child inoculations and the creation of a central bank. But these are tiny steps relative to our ambitions of creating a multi-ethnic centralised state based on democracy, respect for human rights, gender equality and the rule of law. Many of these objectives are not simply difficult but dishonest and impossible.

Rural areas of Afghanistan remain far more isolated, conservative and resistant to change than we publicly acknowledge. War has eroded social structures and entrenched ethnic suspicion between Pashtun, Hazara and Tajik populations. Pakistan and Iran continue to exercise a dangerous influence. There is a widespread insurgency. Many provinces are now too dangerous for international civilians to visit. Power is in the hands of tribal leaders and militia commanders.

Much of Afghanistan is barren and most people cannot read or write. Despite our efforts in counter-narcotics, production is at a record high; in Balkh, where the government boasts that the poppy is eliminated, villagers are growing cannabis instead. Afghanistan's economic comparative advantage seems to lie in the fact that it is the source of 92% of Europe's heroin and yet still receives \$4 billion a year in international aid.

Most of these problems are beyond the power of the United States to solve, let alone Britain. Yet Britain continues to behave as though it were omnipotent. It assumed responsibility for Helmand, perhaps the most difficult province; it chose to take prime responsibility for counter-narcotics, perhaps the most difficult security issue; and it has launched a "state-building" programme in areas dominated by groups opposed to the government. Most of this effort is wasted and has often made the situation worse for both Afghans and Britain.

We need a policy that reflects our actual capacity rather than our hubristic fantasies. We cannot win a counter-insurgency campaign against the Taliban. We do not control the borders with Pakistan, where insurgents find safety and support. Our troop numbers are limited and so is our understanding of local structures. Nato is divided and uncoordinated. The Afghan government lacks the ability to provide the level of support that we require. The local population is at best suspicious of our actions. In Helmand, where we have increased the troop presence from 200 to over 7,000, our gains can only be temporary. It is more dangerous there for foreign civilians than it was two years ago, before we deployed our troops.

We have also discovered that we cannot create key Afghan institutions from outside. The police are predatory and corrupt; in some cases, security improves when they withdraw. We can build a technical

institution such as a central bank and we have trained soldiers, but we have not had a big impact on the police, rural courts or power structures. Instead of trying to transform remote parts of the country with slogans of "rule of law" and "governance" we should accept that we don't have the power, knowledge or legitimacy to change those societies.

Moreover, we cannot run successful development projects in the middle of an insurgency. A dollar spent in Kabul has about 20 times the impact of a dollar in an insurgent-dominated town such as Musa Qala in north Helmand, where much of our aid was wasted on security and projects were undermined by lack of intimate engagement with the community. In such towns, expensively constructed projects collapse or are destroyed as we leave.

Afghanistan will probably remain weakly governed and poor for a long time. There is little we can do to prevent it. But it is not a cause for despair because there are things that we can do, and do well. We have the ability to build roads and dams, to provide advice on commercial law or to undertake development projects in stable areas. The province of Bamiyan has had far less money poured into it than the small insurgency-ridden sub-district of Panjawi, but it has become a much better place for its inhabitants. This is because its population brings its own ingenuity and energy to bear on foreign-supported projects and will maintain them after we leave.

We should focus on such places, mainly in the centre and the north. We should also pursue a security agenda focused on counter-terrorism, rather than counter-insurgency, using intelligence or special forces operations to destroy terrorist training camps if they reemerge.

Our principle should be to protect ourselves against a terrorist threat from Afghanistan, while delivering a handful of well executed projects that create jobs and incomes for Afghans and help to restore national confidence after decades of conflict. Afghanistan is not going to be the only fragile and unstable poor country with which we will have to deal over the next 30 years. We need a strategy, one that is smarter, more honest and more efficient with our resources; one which can be applied to Somalia, Sudan or anywhere else where trouble emerges.

We are hiding the dishonesty and failures of our policy by claiming that "failure is not an option" and talking about a moral obligation. Ought implies can. We do not have the moral obligation to do what we cannot do.

NO Sherard Cowper-Coles is British ambassador to Afghanistan

THE cabinet ministers involved in Afghanistan - David Miliband, who paid his first visit as foreign secretary outside Europe here, Douglas Alexander, Des Browne and the prime minister himself - have told me that they want us to tell it as it is. They have asked us what is going right, what is going wrong, what Britain should be doing more of and what less of. You yourself have talked to several of them on their visits here. I'm surprised you continue to believe we are starry-eyed about what is possible.

Telling it as it is is precisely what my team and I have done; and over the six years since the Bonn agreement on the future of Afghanistan, much has been achieved, more than you acknowledge: a constitution is in place; presidential and parliamentary elections have been held; millions of children, particularly girls, are back in school; dramatically improved health-care means that tens of thousands of young Afghans are alive today who would not otherwise have been; schools and clinics have been built, wells sunk, roads laid; millions of Afghans are connected not just to the next village but to the world by mobile telephone; and, perhaps most significantly, Afghanistan enjoys a robustly free media in which her problems are debated.

We have reported all that. We have also reported what needs to be done better, not just by Britain but also by the international community and the Afghans themselves. Coordination among the scores of foreign actors here is one example. Improving the way we train the Afghan police is another. Getting proper Afghan and international backing for a serious long-term policy for taking the country out of the opium trade is a third.

So you are right to suggest that Britain is taking Afghanistan very seriously. But we are doing so not on our own, as you seem to imply, but as part of a huge international coalition; a coalition that gave its word in Bonn - and again nearly two years ago in London - that it would help the Afghans rebuild their shattered

land.

Some of the hopes expressed at those meetings, by Afghans at least as much as by foreigners, may prove unrealistic. But nothing I have seen in my six months on the job suggests that anyone involved in this project has what you call “hubristic fantasies” about what Britain can do.

Indeed, those inside government agree with much of your diagnosis. We sympathise with your frustration at what has not been done in a land you know and love more than most outsiders. But I cannot agree with what seems to be your prescription: that we pull back and out; that we concentrate on a few prestige development projects in more developed areas and end our military support to the Afghan authorities, instead concentrating on intelligence-led special forces strikes against “terrorist” targets. You don’t say whether you think that Britain should move to such a posture unilaterally, or whether we should try to persuade the Americans, the Canadians, the Dutch and all the other 40 or so nations represented here, plus the United Nations, Nato and the European Union, to do the same.

At present, Britain channels about 80% of its aid through the government of Afghanistan, under arrangements overseen by the World Bank and audited by Price Waterhouse Coopers. We do so because we believe we have to trust the Afghans to rebuild their own country. Are you saying we should end all that?

You say we should give up on counter-narcotics, so allowing Afghanistan to turn itself into a narco-state. And this, when all the evidence (13 poppy-free provinces this year, compared with six last) is that, where there is security, poppy production falls. This is a hard road, but giving up now would undermine all else we do.

Similarly, I don’t understand your thinking on our military posture. If we, and the Americans, Canadians, Dutch and others, did as you suggest, the Taliban would sweep back to power across the south and east, destroying all that has been achieved in the past six years. The people - especially the women - of the Pashtun belt would be plunged back into a new dark age.

The warlords would regroup and come down from the north. Kandahar would fall. Kabul would be fought over again. A new and even bloodier civil war would erupt while the West stood on the sidelines, engaging in what you call “counter-terrorist” operations.

There is much we should do better. But your prescription would not only kill the patient; it would bring shame on any who tried to administer it.

This is an edited extract from a debate in the next issue of Prospect magazine, on sale on Thursday. For details visit www.prospect-magazine.co.uk

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