News
By Anna Gawel
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Putting an Afghan Face on New U.S. Strategy

The revised blueprint being used by American and NATO forces in Afghanistan calls for a comprehensive strategy that combines progress on the military, political and development fronts — to secure, hold and rebuild, instead of the previous focus on kill, capture and kind of rebuild.

The goal of course is to create a secure environment that can provide basic services to a beleaguered population, while at the same time addressing volatility in neighboring Pakistan.

But Britain’s secretary of state for international development, Douglas Alexander, adds one more ingredient to the formula: secure, hold and rebuild — “through the Afghan government and less around it,” he told a panel at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington on July 30.

Alexander, in charge of British development efforts in Afghanistan, had just returned from a trip to Kabul and Helmand province, where American, British and NATO troops recently staged a major offensive to retake the area from the Taliban (Britain is the second-largest contributor of troops and aid behind the United States). As Afghanistan approaches its presidential elections on Aug. 20, Alexander shared some insights from his visit, expounding on the current two-pronged approach of military might and civilian reconstruction to defeat the insurgency.

Alexander agreed that military gains must pave the way for a broader campaign to tackle the country’s endemic poverty and lawlessness. “Indeed, it is only through sustained military pressure that the security conditions will be created for the political processes and developmental progress that are required,” he said, noting that within 48 hours of ground being taken by British forces in Helmand, “civilian stabilization experts were beginning their work in the Babaji area: engaging with key leaders, organizing community shuras and beginning the task of providing cash-for-work programs.”

But Alexander believes the key to long-lasting stability is for a viable Afghan state to be the face of that stability — which is why the current strategy must be accompanied by a transfer of power, resources and ultimately legitimacy to the Afghan government to build a sense of national unity from the current patchwork of tribal leaders and weak central government.

“If we are to achieve our shared goals for greater security through a successful counterinsurgency strategy, it is vital that we both strengthen the state and weaken the Taliban,” he said.

The first step is to funnel resources through Kabul and not through the international actors that contribute 80 percent of the Afghan national budget. “Today just 20 percent of international aid is currently channeled through government systems, and the government itself raises only 7 percent of national income in revenue, one of the lowest rates anywhere in the world,” Alexander pointed out, arguing that “the people of Afghanistan need to see their government rather than foreign powers delivering improvements.”

And that means improving the government itself by strengthening anti-corruption bodies and investigating Afghanistan’s local system of governance to fit within a national framework.

“This means sorting out the roles, responsibilities and accountability of governors, line ministries and local councils — and how they are all supported by the donor-funded provincial reconstruction teams. Provincial and district governors need to be appointed on the basis of their ability to do the job, and given the resources they need to deliver policing, justice, basic services and employment opportunities to their people,” Alexander explained, citing the example he saw of Helmand’s governor who instituted a Food Zone program that helped persuade 32,000 farmers to plant wheat instead of opium.

Yet Britain’s development front man also stressed that before traditional challenges such as poverty and unemployment can be alleviated, security must come first. In fact, Alexander argues that while health care and other services are vital, the building blocks of development are safety, access to justice and accountability, which again should ultimately be provided by Afghan and not British or American authorities.

“And indeed to give just one example from Helmand, only two or three criminal cases are handled by the court in Gereshk each month,” he said. “It is little wonder, therefore, that on Monday when I met teachers in Musa Kala and farmers in Lashkar Ghar, they all made the same single plea: for...
security. So great is the fear and the threat of violence that security and justice matter as much, if not more, than the provision of other basic services in the eyes of many ordinary Afghans.

“And while the presence of the international community to support the Afghan people resisting the insurgency is and will remain vital for some time, ultimately a stronger state at the local and national level is required to deliver that basic security. The gradual replacement of international forces with the Afghan army and police is therefore vital to ensure that security and justice are in place on a sustainable long-term basis,” he added.

Yet that security must still go hand in hand with providing jobs, education, infrastructure and health care, especially in a country where half the population remains mired in poverty and unemployment stands at 40 percent. “So far from being peripheral to our shared mission, and in strengthening the capacity of the state to deliver basic services to the population — including a stronger economy in which they can make a decent and lawful living — is central to our task,” Alexander said.

To that end, he recommends prioritizing growth and employment, which includes boosting agriculture to create millions of jobs and food security. In addition, as the Taliban loses its grip on power, Alexander said it will be crucial to reintegrate former fighters who joined the insurgency “not out of conviction but out of desperation.”

Alexander also urged better coordination of international aid through the U.N. Assistance Mission to Afghanistan and speeding up the handover of power to Afghan authorities after the presidential elections.

Alexander admits his agenda is “straightforward to articulate but will be hard to deliver,” though he also points out that tangible progress has been made in recent years and even months.

“The United Nations estimates that 5 million refugees have been able to return home since 2001. This year’s cereal harvest is likely to be a record. And, crucially, increasing numbers of girls and boys are now going to school,” he said, nothing that although the Taliban has destroyed or attacked more than 530 schools since 2007, more than 6 million children are now enrolled in school — a third of them girls — up from 900,000 boys under the Taliban when educating girls was deemed illegal.

“The bottom line is that the government in Afghanistan must outperform the Taliban in providing services including security and justice to the people of that nation if the insurgents are to be rejected and the insurgency defeated.”


Photos: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

New Zealand’s Clark Pushes for World’s Poor

It’s hard enough finding the political will to help the world’s poorest in good times, but throw in a global recession — not to mention climate change, energy strains, a possible flu pandemic, nuclear showdowns with North Korea and Iran and ongoing conflict in the Middle East and South Asia — and the poor only get pushed further down the totem pole.

Yet all of those international challenges are also why developed nations shouldn’t abandon those less fortunate, both for moral and practical reasons, according to Helen Clark, head of the United Nations Development Program, who spoke at a luncheon on the impact of the economic downturn on developing nations. “In our interconnected world, the dividing line between ‘their’ problem and ‘our’ problem is increasingly thin, if not altogether absent,” Clark said at the discussion hosted by the Women’s Foreign Policy Group at the Ritz-Carlton in Washington on July 23.

“Providing development assistance, especially now, is surely a moral imperative. It should be of concern to all of us that those least responsible for the economic crisis stand to bear the brunt of its effects, and are the least able to respond,” she said. “But it is also in the developed world’s interests that developing countries are prosperous, have healthy populations, are enabled to support the fight against climate change, and are well governed and stable,” she added, citing previously failed states such as Afghanistan.

To that end, Clark — New Zealand’s former prime minister — urged developed nations to fulfill their pledges to the U.N. Millennium Development Goals aimed at reducing poverty by 2015. “Nine years ago leaders gathered in New York at the General Assembly of the United Nations and agreed on the Millennium Development Goals, with a target date for reaching them of 2015. I was one of the heads of government who signed off on that commitment,” she said, stressing that the eight MDGs “were not meant to be merely aspirational — they were meant to be met, and it is in all of our interests that they are met.”

Those eight MDGs target improvements in eradicating extreme poverty (living on less than $1.25 a
day) and hunger, reducing child mortality, promoting gender equality and primary education, and combating diseases such as HIV/AIDS, among other indicators.

The good news? “The global target of reducing by half the proportion of people living in extreme poverty between 1990 and 2015 seems likely to be achieved,” Clark said, pointing out that universal primary education targets were also for the most part on track.

But elsewhere the picture looks bleak. “For example, as many as one billion people are likely to remain in extreme poverty by 2015,” Clark said, noting that no country in sub-Saharan Africa is set to achieve all the MDGs.

“And the goal toward which there has been least progress so far is that which seeks to improve maternal health,” Clark added. “This speaks volumes about the low status of women in far too many societies, and about the low priority given to meeting their needs.”

The topic of gender equality of course resonated with the audience. The Washington-based Women’s Foreign Policy Group, which promotes the participation of women in international affairs, hosted the luncheon — the inaugural event in its “Women in Power Series.” CBS news correspondent Kimberly Dozier moderated the discussion, which was attended by ambassadors from the African Union, Bahrain, Cape Verde, Croatia, Italy, Kyrgyzstan, Liechtenstein, Mali, Netherlands, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, and Zambia.

Clark herself is the first female administrator of the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) and one of the few women to ever serve as a head of state. As head of UNDP, she’s active working with some 100 countries to examine how the economic crisis has hurt their climb out of poverty.

Pointing out that much of the global recession “will hit girls and women the hardest,” Clark warned that recent gains made against poverty could easily be wiped out by the lingering recession, which hasn’t fully made its way to many developing countries.

“Worldwide, the number of people who will live in extreme poverty in 2009 is estimated to be 55 to 90 million higher than was forecast before the recession. In 2007, just before the global food crisis hit, the number of chronically hungry people in developing countries stood at around 850 million. FAO [Food and Agriculture Organization] believes that number will exceed one billion this year.”

And judging by the enormous stimulus packages being implemented across the world, Clark insists that coming up with money for far-less expensive development projects isn’t too much to ask — or at the least following through on past promises. On that front, Clark said she was looking forward to the upcoming G20 summit in Pittsburgh and was encouraged by the Obama administration’s development approach. But she also complained that countries have yet to fulfill commitments made in 2005 at the Gleneagles G8 summit — pointing out that the “G8 pledge to Africa remains about 90 percent short of delivery.”

“We cannot let the MDGs simply become another promise the international community has made but has not kept,” she warned. “What none of us want at this time is the global recession precipitating more conflicts in already fragile states, and winding back the clock on development in stable but still poor countries.”

For more information, read “Developing Nations Plead for Help to Keep Poor from Getting Poorer” in the August 2009 issue of The Washington Diplomat.

Remembering the Secret Division of Europe
This August 23 marks the 70th anniversary of the signing of the