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From the issue dated

In Building Nations, Establish Security, Then Democracy

By KIMBERLY MARTEN



The international community, led by the United States and its European allies, has been eager to paint the presidential election in Afghanistan last fall as a success story. As expected, the election resulted in a victory for the incumbent transitional leader, Hamid Karzai. The vote had great symbolic importance, since the first time in three decades that the citizens of Afghanistan had gone to the polls. The election was seen as a step on the path to re-establishing self-determination for a country that had been portrayed as a step on the path to re-establishing self-determination for a country that had been ravaged by a brutal Soviet invasion, years of violent anarchy and civil war, and then taken over by the Taliban.

But, as in so many of the areas of the world where the United Nations has authorized peacekeeping operations in recent years, the international community has emphasized shallow political symbolism over the achievement of real security for the people involved. While some kind of semidemocratic process may indeed be under way in Afghanistan, the country is far from secure. It is plagued by continuing regional endemic police corruption, and its economy is propped up by illicit activities such as smuggling to the opium trade. With President Karzai's power limited largely to the southern third of the country, the real struggle will probably emerge this year, when parliamentary elections are scheduled to be held.

The United Nations has had good intentions, motivated by the belief that if war-torn countries become more like the developed West, the result will be a better human environment and greater economic opportunities for their inhabitants. Westerners in particular have also believed that such changes will make the rest of the world safer by decreasing the likelihood of future warfare in these troubled regions. (The security concerns of strong and wealthy countries in peacekeeping operations are often motivated by the fact that the world stood by as the Rwanda genocide unfolded in 1994, paralyzed by a similarly weak reaction to the genocide in Darfur, in Sudan. If the security of Western societies is threatened -- by refugee flows, the expansion of terrorism beyond borders, or terrorism -- that powerful countries are motivated to take military operations.) Yet even the best of intentions do not create coherent policy strategies when the competing interests of various liberal-democratic actors come to the fore.

While the security gap means that Afghanistan is a particularly egregious example of good intentions going wrong, it is not unique. In various areas around the world, from Kosovo to the U.N. Security Council has authorized international military force to be needed to enforce the peace and help build new liberal-democratic societies. But in many places their success has been limited.

As I have explored in my recent work, what is striking is that in many ways, the operations of today's peace operations bear more than a passing resemblance to those of the liberal-democratic empires at the turn of the 20th century. One hundred years ago, France and the United States all began stationing permanent occupation forces in various colonies around the globe (ranging from Africa to India to the Philippines), in

peace and stability there. Then as now, they were motivated by their own security interests, although they defined their security differently than now. They saw peaceful access to the raw materials, shorelines, and other resources of their colonies as vital to prepare for looming warfare.

Sometimes colonialism is portrayed as being only about profit and pillage. It certainly did involve those things, in a way that today's peace operations do not. Yet the colonialism practiced by liberal-democratic countries 100 years ago also had the intention of bringing what were seen as the political and social benefits of the developed world to areas that were less fortunate. In many of their colonies, the liberal empires championed social and economic development, something believed to benefit not only the colonies but also the colonizers, who would have an easier time governing if their presence was seen by their subjects as bringing some good.

Whether it was France's *mission civilisatrice* in Africa (designed to improve the colonies by sharing the wealth of French culture), Britain's claim to be providing trusteeship and guidance for colonies that would eventually gain independence, or the United States' avowed desire to bring democracy to the Philippines, some form of humanitarianism -- however flawed and paternalistic -- was part of the liberal-democratic colonial equation. Political and social development was believed to bring security.

Beyond those similarities in motive, the imperial era was marked by political downfalls that bear some resemblance to those encountered in today's peace operations. Liberal democracies then, as now, faced competing domestic political pressures. Now things are made even harder by the fact that to gain legitimacy peace operations must be multilateral, involving the cooperation of many states, U.N. agencies, and nongovernmental organizations.

In imperial times single states acting alone kept the peace in their colonies. But even then there was little consistency in the policies pursued in the colonies as governors came and went. Operations carried out in areas of the world that were not considered central to the security of the Western powers faced relative neglect and fell off the front pages of the newspapers. The home public often paid little attention to what really went on. Sometimes this meant that atrocities were carried out by colonial governors that their home publics later found shocking, since those actions were not in line with the public intention to help the less fortunate in their colonies.

The issues at stake have changed today's peacekeepers do not routinely abuse the locals. But despite all of its good intentions, the international community has not done enough to provide the security that Afghanistan so desperately needs to become a normal, functioning state. In this sense, Afghanistan faces neglect similar to what characterized the imperial operations of old.

The United States has only around 18,000 troops in the country -- a number that pales in comparison to the 120,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, even though it was Afghanistan, not Iraq, that provided al Qaeda with the training grounds used in the September 11 attacks. Iraq received more attention from Washington because now, as in the imperial era, warfare between states has more political resonance than does the idea of providing stability to faraway populations. (We saw this in the failure to prepare adequately for the postwar phase of Iraq, too.)

The Pentagon's major focus in Afghanistan remains fighting the leftover Taliban and al Qaeda elements in the narrow Pakistani border region; the United States has contributed little to basic postwar security in the rest of the country. Except for a small and temporary emergency response force set up for the election period, the United States is not directly participating in the U.N.-authorized peace mission in the country.

The steps taken by U.S. troops show the gap that sometimes arises between intentions and actions. There certainly have been efforts to provide humanitarian assistance to the local population. But some argue that the ham-handed tactics used by American forces in their house-to-house searches for insurgents -- tactics that have threatened traditional gender norms by exposing otherwise covered women to the eyes of foreign men -- have undercut peace-building efforts, making it harder for military forces elsewhere in the country to maintain popular support for their presence. Certainly the prisoner abuses carried out by a few U.S. soldiers in Afghanistan, brought to light in May 2004 at the same time as the Abu Ghraib prison scandal in Iraq, bear an uncomfortable resemblance to the disconnect between popular intention and military reality that was prevalent in the colonial era.

The U.N.-authorized International Security Assistance Force peace mission has generally performed well where it is based. In May 2004 I was embedded with the Canadian forces who were then providing the greatest number of troops in Kabul, and I accompanied them on four patrols. They demonstrated great professionalism and care in their efforts to provide security to their assigned areas. One of their major goals was to establish a sense of continuing presence, to deter not only major attacks but also common street crime and police corruption, which interfered with basic commerce in Kabul. They were careful to try to get the population on their side, by being respectful toward local culture.

Yet glaring gaps remain between intentions and reality. NATO troops in the U.N. peace mission, who number fewer than 9,000, are still deployed in only very limited areas of the country. While NATO has often stated its intention to increase both its troop numbers on the ground and the geographical area they cover, it has repeatedly missed its own targets for expansion. In these efforts it has been beset by political differences among its members.

For example, in late September German soldiers in Faizabad, one of the five provinces covered by the NATO presence, were criticized for not coming to the assistance of unarmed international aid workers who were threatened by rioters. Two of the workers were severely beaten, and the rest had to rescue one another from the violence.

Germany responded that its soldiers had done the best they could, given the limited number of troops they had available. What was not publicly emphasized is that the Bundestag's interpretation of the German Constitution prohibits its soldiers from engaging in riot-control duties, thereby limiting their flexibility as peacekeepers in unstable regions. The political priorities of liberal democracies sometimes get in the way of consistent action.

Meanwhile, both the United States and its NATO allies have made efforts to train a new Afghan National Army. But it has been slow to get off the ground. Eventually the army is supposed to number 70,000 soldiers. For now, somewhere around 19,000 have been trained, a number dwarfed by the estimated 50,000 warlord-militia members still at large.

While the Afghan National Army has occasionally been sent to quell regional violence, its effectiveness in those cases is probably more attributable to the American trainers providing air support, transportation, and command than to the local troops themselves. And while the trainers express confidence that the quality of Afghan troops is improving with time, success has been hampered by the country's low literacy rate, leaving many soldiers unable to do the simple arithmetic necessary to fire artillery, as well as by poor habits of discipline left over from the days when these same soldiers were insurgents fighting the civil war. Soldiers have gone AWOL for days at a time when they receive their pay, and their loyalty to the state (as opposed to other political actors) has sometimes been unclear.

In other words, the international community has attempted to move Afghanistan along a liberal-democratic path before ensuring the basic security necessary to allow any kind of state

to function. It is not surprising that some of the voting in the Afghan presidential election last fall appears to have been marred by fraud and intimidation. Country experts like Barnett Rubin, of New York University, have predicted that especially as the parliamentary elections draw near, the democratization process may be associated with increasing violence. As in the times of empire, there is a slip between intentions and outcomes, as both resources and political will are inadequate, and the policies followed by liberal-democratic states are inconsistent.

Many scholars have explored the comparison between empire and today's peace-and-stability operations, noting similarities in the attitudes and even methods of the two eras. Michael Ignatieff, of Harvard University, in a series of 2002 articles in *The New York Times Magazine*, explicitly compares the activities of the international community in Bosnia and Afghanistan to the reign of colonial governors. Neta Crawford, in *Argument and Change in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) urges the international community to be more cognizant of its own paternalistic motives. She argues that humanitarian intervention can continue to propagate the old division of the world into "civilized" and "uncivilized" lands, as the Western-led international community argues that it knows best what the future of political society should look like in the countries where peacekeepers are sent.

Roland Paris, in *At War's End: Building Peace After Civil Conflict* (Cambridge, 2004) notes that the liberalizing mission of peace operations in the 1990s resembles the imperial French *mission civilisatrice*. He explores the dilemmas of this mission through a series of case studies of modern peacekeeping efforts, concluding that if the international community could achieve greater coordination in building solid public institutions before attempting other forms of liberal change, the long-term effects of their peacekeeping efforts would be more successful.

Simon Chesterman, in *You, the People: The United Nations, Transitional Administration, and State-Building* (Oxford University Press, 2004), treats the legal and policy implications of today's state-building activities as modern variants of practices begun in the colonial era.

Perhaps most controversially, the historian Niall Ferguson has argued in a series of two books -- *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (Basic Books, 2003) and *Colossus: The Price of America's Empire* (Penguin, 2004) -- that the British empire was good for its colonies, and that the United States should not be so hesitant to pursue empire today.

It is ironic, though, that one of the success stories Ferguson cites is the colony of British India. One can argue that India today is at least a passably stable democracy, with relatively well-functioning institutions heavily influenced by the British example (despite the continuing concerns about human rights in Kashmir). Yet that same British colony produced Pakistan, troubled by military coups throughout its history and embroiled today in the instability associated with Islamist insurgency. We should also not forget that London tried, without much success, to extend the rule of British India over Afghan territory, too.

What needs to be added to these comparisons of imperialism and peacekeeping is the realization that the political characteristics of liberal democracies have had similar consequences for both types of operation. Liberal-democratic states, whether the empires of old or the leaders of peace operations today, lack the political will and resources to enforce political change in foreign societies. Today's international community should therefore avoid taking on too much -- or claiming too much for itself -- in places like Afghanistan.

At another level, though, the historical comparison brings up a positive lesson that should not be ignored: Professional military organizations in liberal democracies, whether empire builders or peace enforcers, are quite capable of being good war fighters while also doing

police and constabulary duties well. The key is that they must be trained to do so, and rewarded for doing it.

In 1934 the British army published a book called *Imperial Policing*, by Maj. Gen. Sir Charles W. Gwynn, that detailed how security should be provided in the colonies. Above all else, the goal was to get the locals on the side of empire. This meant that the use of force -- for example, when dealing with riots -- should be limited and restrained, and that the troops should make clear that they were sympathetic to local concerns. Both more stability and better intelligence would be forthcoming if local inhabitants decided that the troops were worth helping.

To this day, officers from Britain and the historical British Commonwealth countries believe that their high-quality performance in peace operations is due to the lessons they were taught in time of empire. Australian troops performed well in leading the U.N.-authorized mission that brought peace to East Timor in 1999, using variants of just those techniques. In 2004 Canadian commanders adopted a similar set of tactics in Afghanistan, deeming that the best way to protect their own forces was to make them both visible and accessible to the local population. Both Australian and Canadian forces are key allies in the U.S.-led war on terror; no one doubts their professionalism or war-fighting skills.

Rather than trying to enact too much drastic change with too few political and economic resources, wealthy liberal-democratic states with powerful militaries should concentrate on doing a better job of providing on-the-ground security to societies in need of it.

In particular, at a time when militaries are shrinking across the globe, the United States needs to recognize that in addition to winning wars, its own military forces have to be better trained and equipped to win the peace that follows the wars it chooses to wage. Elections that are widely seen by local participants as flawed or irrelevant will not move real liberal democracy forward. Stable and secure societies that are able to conduct their normal business without fear will instead provide the bedrock for future social change.

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