

Afghan testing ground

The Washington Times

October 6, 2004

Adam Solove, SPECIAL TO THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Just days before Afghanistan's elections, conservatives and liberals, Americans and Europeans are trading barbs about the country's progress.

There's plenty of blame to go around. Yet all agree Saturday's elections are a chance, perhaps the final chance, to set the country on track for positive economic, political, social and security developments.

On the other hand, fears the election might see violence, fraud or extremists in elected office are well-founded. NATO forces have played only a limited role, leaving regional warlords and fundamentalist leaders free to undermine the government. Central control has faltered while drug production has soared to an estimated half of the economy.

Regional leaders are taking note. America's democratic grandstanding rings hollow against Afghanistan's troubles. Beset by fundamentalism, Central Asian governments now have to choose between the seemingly empty rhetoric of freedom and the immediate promise of authoritarian security measures.

Leaders in Central Asia and throughout the developing world face problems unfamiliar to outsiders. Governments without control, borders without guards, and free markets filled with drugs and corruption and low literacy, make security and freedom difficult goals. In Central Asia, weak regimes have one tool, oil, to lure foreign aid in fighting fundamentalism and chaos. Despite America's economic might and military power, the governments increasingly turn to other powers for help.

China and Russia aim to partner with unstable, resource-rich states. China needs new sources of energy to ensure continued economic growth. Russia's desire to appear resolute against terrorism dovetails with the goal of reviving its lost imperial power. Beijing and Moscow also see a ring of authoritarian Central Asian states as a potential buffer zone between themselves and the turbulent Middle East.

The two powers have fought fundamentalism in the past using strategies they are likely to repeat. Russia's continuous war in Chechnya has been tough on innocent civilians, creating new and more violent rebel recruits. China has found the same vicious cycle with its control of Xianjiang Province, where efforts to control guerrilla attacks have only multiplied the fundamentalists' support. Despite costly failures, both countries' militaries urge even more violent responses.

Given the horrible records of the two countries, it is hard to believe Central Asian governments would turn to China and Russia for help putting down Muslim extremists. Yet Afghanistan is only one among many failed American projects.

Nation-building efforts from Somalia to Kosovo to Iraq have created struggling democracies with weak economies. America's impotence in the developing world largely owes to its inability to help weak governments fight rebel political elements and create unity. This crucial "nation-making" ability would

give America more leverage over weak regimes in spreading democracy, fighting terrorism and countering rival powers.

Unnoticed victories against communist rebels in the Philippines and El Salvador suggest a new mindset for creating stable governments in chaotic surroundings. It was mainly popular support, not firepower or oppression, that won these low-intensity conflicts. The late counterinsurgency expert Edward Lansdale described the goal simply: "Take the cause away from the guerrilla."

Rather than speak of aid in paternalistic terms, experts like Mr. Lansdale made a point to respect and enhance the dignity and initiative of the native peoples. They waged a positive psychological war against the despair and hopelessness exploited by rebels. Instead of the shortsighted nation-building approach, victory came through cheap, grass-roots efforts to create and strengthen the institutions of daily life.

Innovative programs can turn status quo governments into vibrant institutions for social change. People's defense forces make feared militaries into the defenders of all. Rural civil service schools educate peasants in bureaucracy and bureaucrats in peasant life, creating social mobility and understanding. Secure and responsible local governments can then create the social patterns necessary for modern democracy and "light-side" capitalism.

Winning popular support through political reform, economic progress and humanitarian aid sounds like a philanthropic vision. Yet these tools would give America new leverage over oil-rich Central Asian governments desperate to retain power. A plan for aiding development would be a solid basis for fighting terrorism and diminishing the influence of potential rivals China and Russia.

Afghanistan is the perfect testing ground for a new "nation-making" strategy. A strong and stable government would be the envy of its neighbors and a wonderful reference for aid efforts elsewhere. Most needed is a long-term plan for helping Afghans build their own social change, economic prosperity, political reform and security. America can best spread influence by spreading hope and best fight terror by fighting for the terrorized.

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