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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Afghanistan at the Brink

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KABUL, Afghanistan

Afghanistan is not Iraq. That's the good news. Decades of war are devastating, but not as crippling as decades of Saddam Hussein's totalitarian hell. The glint of initiative outweighs fear's residue in Afghan eyes.

Across this dirt-poor country — think sub-Saharan Africa — small signs of initiative and awakening abound: new carpet-weaving businesses, surging wheat production, just-opened schools, solar panels on mud-brick homes. Growth is more than 8 percent.

Since the Taliban's fall in 2001, four million Afghan refugees have come home in one of the biggest post-1945 returns of people. About 38 percent of school students are girls, up from zero. Roads, clinics, mine-clearing and several million cellphones are changing Afghan lives.

All this may seem a decent return on about \$22 billion of American investment since 2002. A further \$5.6 billion is under review for 2008. The strategic aim is a stable Afghanistan that is no longer for rent by terrorists from one-eyed mullahs.

But if Afghanistan is not Iraq, it's not delivered from war either. Lebanon looks stable by comparison. Like Poland, Afghanistan has suffered the fate of a weak state between powerful neighbors. Unlike Poland, it grows poppy and inhabits a region of explosive volatility.

That's the bad news.

I heard many assessments of how long Afghanistan will depend on Western military assistance, but Abdul Jabbar Sabit, the attorney general, was bluntest: "The Afghan Army will not be able to defend the country for 10 years, so the international force has to be here for at least a decade."

He's realistic. An intense U.S. effort is going into producing a credible 72,000-man Afghan Army by 2009. The number may be met, but the force's ability to sustain itself and mount large operations will lag. Capt. Sylvain Caron, a Canadian "mentoring" a nascent battalion, said "the cultural change will take 20 years."

The police are way behind the army. Training has been a disaster. Low salaries, belatedly rising to \$100 from \$50 a month, have made corruption endemic, particularly in narco-territory. Work on a credible police force has scarcely begun.

"We're looking at a long-term commitment," William Wood, the U.S. ambassador, told me. How long? "A number of years." Like in post-war Germany? "It would just be dishonest to pretend to be able to give you a

number.” But, he insisted: “The role of the U.S. military will change.”

Yes, it will recede, but slowly. With Afghanistan at a tipping point, the next U.S. president will face an enduring challenge here of immense proportions. He or she must level with the American people, in a way President Bush never has, about the real burden of an attempt to build two countries from scratch at once. That burden can no longer be borne by military families alone, however much Iraqi extrication is achieved.

For now, unlike in Iraq, the U.S. has real allies here. Peter Struck, the former German defense minister, once said Germany “will also be defended in the Hindu Kush.” But that European conviction is fraying as casualties and violence rise.

The next president will have to fight to maintain NATO solidarity. Huge problems loom. Among them is breaking the growing symbiosis between drug traffickers and the Taliban. Wood described an “exploding drug industry” that “finances the Taliban” and wages “its own assault on institutional government.” The more than \$2 billion spent fighting drugs “hasn’t worked,” he conceded.

Other challenges are containing the rampant corruption of governors chosen by President Hamid Karzai, better integrating sometimes contradictory international efforts and limiting the degree to which Pakistan and Iran meddle.

“The insurgents go some places I cannot go,” acknowledged Gen. Dan K. McNeill, the NATO commander in Afghanistan. Wood told me the country “is facing an insurgency that is able to reconstitute itself outside the country.” That’s grave.

As these comments suggest, the Taliban is still substantially made in Pakistan. U.S. efforts to get needed cooperation from its ally have floundered.

All these problems are redoubled by the unpopularity of Bush’s America. Iran sees in Afghanistan another chance to hurt U.S. interests. But it’s not alone. Russia likes that game these days. China is not averse. Within the alliance, the current European view of America as belligerent, simplistic and insensitive to Islam does not foster unity.

Bush is too much part of the problem to solve it. But the cost of failure is unacceptable. Defeat would destroy NATO. It would further destabilize nuclear-armed Pakistan. It would propel nuke-seeking Al Qaeda from its Waziristan caves.

Not least, it would take those Afghan girls out of school. A Kabul crash course — and I don’t mean in kite-flying — is in order for all serious White House candidates.

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