

U.S. House of Representatives  
Committee on Oversight and Governmental Reforms  
Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs

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The Subcommittee has expressed concern over the practice of making payments to local warlords and even Taliban forces to secure the transit of goods through the territories they control. Opponents of the practice see it as corrupt in principle and an unnecessary acknowledgment of the Taliban's authority in areas of primary concern to the US/NATO campaign. Defenders see it instead as a necessary means of securing a greater end, namely, the advancement of the current strategy of gaining control over territories, holding them, and then promoting forms of development that the local population will welcome. In this light, the practice becomes as tactical means of making the Taliban complicit in its own destruction as an effective force.

I am not going to adjudicate between these two alternatives as they have been presented here and as they are

generally discussed today. Each can and does claim the high ground of principle and strategic prudence. I would like instead to focus your attention on the roads themselves, and on their absolute significance to the task in which we are engaged in Afghanistan. We tend to view them as simply the channels by which we deliver military equipment and supplies to our local forces. This is how we have conceived the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), the magnificent set of road and railroad routes that are moving more goods into Afghanistan today than has ever occurred in that country's history. In this case, as with the interior roads that we are securing through payments to the Taliban, the goods are essential to NATO's military mission.

But roads in Afghanistan and between Afghanistan and its neighbors potentially fulfill even more important functions, ones that pertain to the lives of everyone living in the area and to every government involved.

These functions include:

- 1) Links between farmers in remote areas and secondary markets.
- 2) Links between secondary and primary markets.
- 3) Links between primary markets and markets abroad.
- 4) Links along a continent-wide system of road transport that extends from Europe and the Middle East to India and Southeast Asia.

5) Thanks to the above four factors, roads are the most effective engines for profit to local farmers and processors, and the most efficient incubators of new industries and employment for Afghanistan as a whole, whether in the transport, processing, extractive or service sectors.

President Obama, like President Bush before him, has rightly stressed what is called the “economic” dimension of US strategy in Afghanistan. Without economic progress, no military gains will be solid or sustainable. Indeed, one can go as far as to say that unless the local populace is convinced that the US presence will improve their lives, even short-term military gains will be all but impossible. Stated differently, the US’ stated goals of destroying al Qaeda and crippling the Taliban do not themselves engage local people. Only positive goals will bring them around, and this means the realistic hope of economic improvements for themselves and their families. Because of the five points listed above, the reopening of roads and transport routes within and across Afghanistan is not only the best but the only way of making battlefield gains permanent. Indeed, they are the key to success in Afghanistan.

Dr. Andrew C. Kuchins of CSIS and I, working with a team of experts, have prepared a brief paper on the central importance of roads and transport to our success in Afghanistan. Copies are available here today. David Ignatius

provided a solid overview of the argument in last Sunday's Washington Post.

We argue that roads and other forms of transport, including railroads, pipelines and hydroelectric lines, are together a money machine that can fundamentally transform both Afghanistan and its neighbors. We point out that the reopening of these great transport routes within and through Afghanistan is advancing quickly with many patrons besides the United States. Among those investing billions to reopen continental trade are the Asian Development Bank, World Bank, and the governments of India, China, Pakistan, the EU, Russia, Iran, and all the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus. No change taking place in the world today will do more to improve the lives of millions than this.

In the emergence of these grand networks, Afghanistan stands as a kind of bottleneck or cork. The old Soviet border effectively sliced through the "Silk Roads" that ran across Afghanistan, connecting India and Europe. Even after the collapse of the USSR, Afghanistan remained the great blockage in the system due to Taliban rule there.

The greatest result of Operation Enduring Freedom was not foreseen, intended, or even recognized at the time: by destroying Taliban rule the US opened the possibility of reviving the great transport routes across Afghanistan

that had enabled that country to prosper for 2,000 years. If this happens, ordinary Afghans will be the beneficiaries, for they will be able to sell their agricultural produce at higher-priced markets, get their minerals from mine to markets, and provide services and facilities for truckers and traders alike. Significantly, the Government of Afghanistan also benefits, by gaining (through tariffs) a sustainable income stream. Let me remind you that today US taxpayers are paying all civil service salaries in Afghanistan.

Returning to our main question, is it wise or simply wrong to pay off Taliban forces to enable goods to pass through territories they control. My answer would be this: if this is simply to enable us to deliver military-related goods, it is wrong. It advertises our weakness without bringing direct benefits to the local population.

However, if such a policy is part of a larger strategy based on the reopening of transport and trade within and across Afghanistan, it is prudent and wise. For people who see the chance of getting their crops to higher-priced markets will seize them. They will fight anyone who proposes to close the road thereafter. Similarly, people who are profiting from feeding and servicing the transport sector will resist anyone who proposes to shut down road transport, or to resist the construction of railroads or pipelines. Seen in this context, paying Taliban to keep open a road is nothing less than a way of hiring the Taliban to work towards their own demise.

The Government of Afghanistan fully understands this, and therefore supports the strategy proposed here. Hamid Karzai has written:

“...Once we are on our feet with our own economy,...with Afghanistan becoming a hub for transportation in Central Asia and South and West Asia..., Afghanistan will remain a strong and good and economically viable partner with the United States and our other allies.”

In the same spirit, General David H. Petraeus writes: that:

“Sound strategy demands the use of all the instruments of power. This vision for Afghanistan and the region makes a compelling case that transport and trade can help restore the central role of Afghanistan in Central Asia. By once again becoming a transport hub, Afghanistan can regain economic vitality and thrive as it did in the days of the Silk Road.”