

'Afghanistan Needs a Dayton Agreement'

An Interview with Paddy Ashdown

David den Dunnen

Few people can claim as diverse a career as Lord Ashdown's: the British former marine, diplomat, businessman, youth worker, and Liberal Democrat Party leader went on to become the United Nations High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2002, a position he held until 2006. In an interview with *Atlantisch Perspectief* Ashdown discusses peacebuilding and reconstruction after armed conflicts, in particular in Afghanistan and Kosovo, and the changing power balance in the 21st century world.

Career

In 1972 you left the Royal Marines to join the Foreign Office. Why was that?

I had been a soldier in the Special Forces for 13 years. I had then got off to study Chinese. The Foreign Office asked me if I would join them. Soldiering is a young man's business. I loved everything I have done, though.

When reading your speeches and writings I hear more of a statesman and a diplomat than a soldier. Does this description fit you?

People always concentrate on the fact that I was a soldier. But that may really be the least important factor of my life. It did give me a certain set of experiences, but so did being a youth worker. The fact that you are a soldier in your 30s does not mean you are a soldier still in your 60s. If I would still have sounded like a soldier I wouldn't have developed that much, would I?

The word 'statesman' is a big word, by the way; I am not sure it is appropriate to apply it to me.

Military Intervention

In many of your speeches and writings you argue that intervening powers effectively make the same mistakes again and again, both in deciding whether to intervene, and if so, in conducting the intervention. Are we actually re-inventing the wheel every time? Isn't that overly pessimistic?

No, I'm afraid it is not. Intervention is sometimes believed to be the exception. But look at the figures: in the period from the end of the Cold War the international community has intervened about once every six months under UN Security Council provision in the domestic jurisdiction of another state. On top of this the United States has intervened in U.S.-led coalitions once every two years. What do you conclude from that? Intervention is not the exception, intervention today is part of the regular heartbeat of international affairs.

And yet: do we have a college that teaches how to carry out an intervention? Do we have study groups that are trying to extrapolate what are the reasons for interventions and how you go by it? No, if, nevertheless, there is a huge body of real experience, we need to look what that body tells us about it.

Military interventions are reckoned to account for more than half the number of war casualties in the world today and half the number of

conflicts. Yet in the case of the two interventions that occupy most of our time today, Iraq and Afghanistan, every lesson we have learned since 1992 has been ignored. We have not deployed sufficient troops on the ground to be able to dominate the security space, we have not managed to establish an effective government. As a consequence the international community has conducted interventions in a way which has made them more likely to fail.

One of the elements you include in your lessons from past experience for carrying out interventions is: operate a 'single guiding concept' of what is wanted at the end of the intervention, but do not be too ambitious. But how can something as drastic as military intervention not be ambitious?

I would say it is ambitious to seek to reconstruct a country and to achieve peace. I was amongst some of the first soldiers to march into Belfast, my own home city, in 1969. It took us 37 years to recreate peace there.

Now, if it is difficult enough to create peace in a country, why do we also try to recreate our own system there? Things would have looked differently if we would have gone to Afghanistan and had set our ambitions lower (deny the space to Al-Qaeda; return peace and a government to Afghanistan; allow them to establish their own system of government rather than imposing ours) instead of trying to replicate our own country there.

That is basically a wrong vision, you say.

First of all, it is wrong: if you try to export Western democracy to a Middle-Eastern country like Iraq, it is not likely to succeed, because you have to work with the grain of the country. But it is also setting our ambitions at a level where they cannot be achieved.

What is more: I do not think our democracy is so good that we should be exporting it to other countries at the point of a gun. I personally do not think it is legitimate to intervene for the sake of democracy. It is possible to intervene to give people a choice; I think they would always choose to have a democracy if there is the rule of law and a prosperous economy. But the United Nations has never sanctioned an intervention on behalf of democracy; it has sanctioned it to suppress ethnic killing, genocide or instability.

If you are intervening for democracy in a Muslim country – and seven of the last nine interventions have been there – why don't you recognise that there is a pre-existing form of democracy already there? Islam might very well be the most democratic religion: the mufti [Islamic scholars, ed.] are all elected. If I wanted to know what the opinions of the Islamic community in Bosnia were, I did not just listen to members of parliament, I also listened to their muftis after Friday prayers.

Here is a dilemma: it could be that the only powers willing and able to intervene – the Western, democratic ones – decide together: we only intervene if we are able to 'restyle' this state into a democracy.

Fine, then go on doing it but you are going to fail.

But that's the dilemma: then no-one will be intervening anymore in a situation where it is required.

I do not think that is true. We do not intervene for altruistic motives. We intervene to prevent the spread of instability, because a nation has followed a policy – like Milošević did in Kosovo – which is destabilising the whole region by flooding it by refugees. We intervene in Afghanistan because of 9/11. It is only afterwards that in order to explain to our peoples why we are there, we invent this idea that we are recreating The Hague in Kabul, or Washington in Bagdad.

When I made the rule of law a priority in Bosnia, I discovered that there was a collection of very bright young men from the best law schools in America and Britain rewriting the Bosnian legal code as an Anglo-Saxon-based code. I kicked them all out. Such a code would be completely out of the tradition of the Bosnian one, and would have no relevance to the European legal system into which Bosnia was going to have to fit when becoming a member of the EU. So I brought in Bosnian lawyers to write it. Now, did they write something which found the approval of Washington? No: the Americans got quite upset, because they were contributing money to writing a legal code that would not reflect the Anglo-Saxon one. But that was the reality.

If you want to have the rule of law in Afghanistan, you will probably have to accept that it is going have an element of sharia law in it. Do I like sharia law? No: I am a liberal, it is offensive to me. But am I entitled to kill people not to have the rule of law that they would choose? No, I am not.

But it still is a huge dilemma.

Of course it is. But which dilemma do you want to cope with: explaining to your people that you are contributing money to construct the rule of law in a foreign country by drafting a legal code that your people do not like and that does not perform to your standards, or

*The rule of law
in Afghanistan
will probably have
elements of sharia
law in it*



would you rather have the dilemma of failing and young men losing their lives? Which is the more difficult to explain? I am not pretending this is easy.

Kosovo

One of the things you have pointed out is that an intervening power should not “lose the golden hour”. Already in April 2006 the EU decided to prepare a civil mission to Kosovo. EULEX was launched in February 2008 yet still does not have full operational capability. Has the EU lost its ‘golden hour’?

The ‘golden hour’ in Kosovo was not 2006, it was 1999 at the end of the war! [Then U.S. Senator] Joe Biden and I wrote a paper to our governments in 1999 in which we said: this is the golden hour, you must seize it.

The reality is that everybody knew Kosovo – with 95 per cent Kosovo Albanians, and 5 per cent Serbians – could never again be governed by Belgrade. It had just soaked Kosovo in blood, had denied Kosovo Albanians their rights in a brutal fashion for five years, and had driven them out of Kosovo. We should have said back in 1999: give Kosovo delayed independence when it has reached the standards that you would provide for a ‘Westphalian’-type of state: having the rule of law, human rights, proper relations with its neighbours. The longer

we left the myth that Kosovo was governed by Belgrade, the worse it got. What we did by failing to grasp the golden hour was giving both sides, Kosovo Albanians and the Serbs, the space in which they sought to change the reality by force, a reality that we refused to acknowledge.

There are occasions in history where the way a nation behaves toward its minorities makes it lose its moral and practical right to govern them. I am referring to Britain and the Irish: for 200 years we misgoverned Ireland so badly that eventually we parted: we lost the moral and practical ability to govern it. That was the reality in Kosovo in 1999 as well.

Afghanistan

In 2007 you were mentioned for the post of international high representative for Afghanistan. If you would have accepted, what would you have done differently there?

I did accept. In October 2007 Condoleezza Rice asked me if I would do this job. I said that I did not think it was doable, but I am an old soldier: if you give me the instruments, I will do my best. In December I went to see Afghan President Karzai in Kuwait and we agreed what we would do.

“My appeal is not for more interventions, but for more *careful* interventions.” Paddy Ashdown addressing the UN Security Council on the situation in Bosnia, November 2004 (Photo: UN Photo/M. Garten)



Later on, however, it became very clear that the Afghan government had changed its mind and did not want me to go there. By the way, my wife is delighted: she has a picture of Hamid Karzai on the fridge door to which she says every morning: "Thank you!"

First of all, Afghanistan needs a surge in resources and troops; there is no doubt about that. We are trying to build peace in Afghanistan with 1/25th the amount of troops per head of the population and 1/50th the amount of aid we have put into Bosnia.

But these may be necessary, they are not sufficient. We need two other things, one of which is a clear international plan with priorities. There is no unified plan at present – there are 17 or so. At the moment you have the British thinking Afghanistan is Helmand, the Canadians it is Kandahar, the Dutch thinking it is Uruzgan. It is not. You need a plan and a single commander that will actually coordinate the whole international effort.

My priorities would then be:

- Providing for human security;
- Start building governance from the bottom up, working with the grain of the Afghan structures. Afghanistan now has a centralised constitution – imposed by us on the model of a Western one – whereas it is a highly decentralised country. So there is a massive

mismatch between the theory of governance and the practice of the tribal structure in Afghanistan;

- In Afghanistan – as in Bosnia and elsewhere – one of the mistakes we have made is that we do a deal with the existing powers, because we want to act quickly. Now, in nations after a war, the existing powers are often corrupt. Doing deals with them engrains corruption in the system, instead of the much tougher, much longer, but ultimately much more successful process of constructing the rule of law.

The fact that President Karzai's government is a deeply corrupt one is destroying his credibility and that of the West. The Afghans would prefer the Taliban's nastiness but lack of corruption over Karzai's government. You have to clean that out. And that is why Karzai did not want me to go there, because I would have done exactly what I did in Bosnia, and he knew: in Bosnia we started to attack the corrupt structures, which was the soft underbelly of nationalism. We started to put people in jail, including elected presidents. Now, Karzai is a politician: he has got to win the next election. He has lost the support of the northern tribes, he is very dependent on Pashtun votes and on vote deliverers, i.e. the warlords and criminal bosses of southern Afghanistan. So he knew that what we would going to do would be extremely unpopular with the people he needed to be supportive of.

["My priority for Afghanistan would be building governance from the bottom up, working with the grain of the Afghan structures." A French ISAF soldier with an Afghan boy \(Photo: *Le Parisien*, Ph. de Poulpiquet/NATO\)](#)

Since you cannot reconstruct peace singlehandedly, the other thing necessary is to carry it out with the assistance of the country's neighbours. You have to have a regional agreement. We only managed to do what we did in Bosnia because Zagreb and Belgrade were part of the Dayton Agreement.

You have to construct a regional structure for Afghanistan – if you like: a Dayton for Afghanistan. Not a sample just by the United States, but a regional structure within which you anchor the country. And that means giving Iran and the other neighbours a role to play.

Will they play a constructive role? That is a risk you have to take. I think there is a real possibility that China would be prepared to act as an international guarantor to a regional agreement, which would need to have an international treaty basis for securing the Afghan borders. The Chinese know that Islamist fundamentalism poses a threat to them too. I believe you can bring in Pakistan as well; eventually you might even have Islamic troops helping Pakistan regain control of the FATA border regions.

Absent these ingredients, we are on our way to failure. The real tragedy is that the lives of young men and women, the soldiers we have sent out and who are fighting in an amazingly dangerous war with outstanding courage and professionalism, are being wasted. That is because we might be winning the military battle against the Taliban but we are losing the political fight.

The other way around: do you acknowledge successes in Afghanistan that can be built on and that would need to be expanded?

Of course I see successes. Yet the fundamental things are moving in the opposite direction. There are two:

- Are the Taliban gaining more influence and territory? The territory they have (near) control of is expanding. And increasingly, Afghans – even though they do not like the Taliban – believe and recognise that the future is more likely to be the Taliban's than the West's, because the latter is losing patience and interest in the mission;
- The support with Afghan public opinion for the international operation is declining. Until now, however, more people want us than don't. When I walked into Belfast, the Catholics welcomed us. In a year, we had lost their support – and it took us 35 years to regain it. Once the graphs start to slide it is very difficult to turn it around.

Can it be reversed?

It is going to be very difficult to reverse this position, but yes: I believe it can be. I have great respect for U.S. President Obama. I am close to Richard Holbrooke, he is extremely good.

But my worry is that the American administration will look at Iraq and say: we turned it around with the surge of troops. Actually, that is not true: the surge was part of it, but the Iraqi Awakening Councils were the other. But there will be some in Washington who say: the right way to deal with Afghanistan is a surge. I would say: it is necessary, yet insufficient.

This is the bigger misunderstanding: people, especially in the military, believe that when dealing with peace stabilisation the job is to kill the enemy. But it is to hold the ring while you construct a political solution. There is no point in B52s bombing villages unless it is for a political aim. And until we understand that we cannot turn the tide in Afghanistan.

Future Interventions in a Changing World

When we seem to re-invent the wheel every single intervention, wouldn't the logical conclusion then be to quit? Yet in many of your speeches and articles you argue that it would be a "tragedy" if the international community would respond to failed or unsatisfactory interventions by deciding not to intervene anymore. You seem to advise to intervene even more.

I think we are at one of those quite frightening turning periods in history where you see a shift of power. And whenever that occurs,

*There is no point
in B52s bombing
villages unless it is
for a political aim*

you get a period of great turbulence and danger. I do not think the American 'empire' is declining, but what is clear is that we are reaching the end of the Western hegemony of international affairs.

We are now dealing with a much more multipolar world. Power is shifting

in two directions: one laterally towards the East, one vertically, where power is being sucked out of the nation state and put onto the global stage, where it is not subject to the rule of law. In any other circumstances, in any other time, this would create a period of immense turbulence. Add to that the other challenges that we are facing, such as global warming, resource conflicts, and overpopulation.

Our capacity to manage this process of change will depend on a number of things:

firstly, on our ability to bring governance to the global space; secondly, on our ability to intervene where it is necessary to stop the spread of conflict.

So my guess is: if you want a more peaceful world, we probably are going to have to intervene more rather than less. Yet my appeal is not for more interventions, but for more *careful* interventions. Before you intervene, you have to ask yourself: can we do this? It is better not to intervene than to try and make a mess of it. We have to plan for it as well as for the peacemaking process. We have to recognise that we are in for the long term, that it requires political will and economic resources.

In the West we have restructured our armed forces in order to be able to project military power. But war is not the problem: we can win them relatively easy – they last two weeks, perhaps five. The real problem is what comes afterwards: building the peace. We have restructured nothing to project the power to reconstruct nations afterwards. The real difficulty is creating the judiciary, the rule of law, establishing proper, efficient economic systems, taxation, etc.

America, Transatlantic Relations...

We are all watching President Obama with a mixture of hope and nervousness. Some of my friends, especially the left-wing ones, say the days of America are over: America is now a 'declining power'. I do not believe that. I think you know a nation which is still capable by its capacity to change, and the one thing the Americans are amazing at is doing just that. Obama's election itself is an astonishing example of a nation that remains light on its feet.

If you look at the 'Petraeus revolution' in the American armed forces: they are better in counterinsurgency than we (the British, the Dutch) are, and we reckoned we were the world leaders here. America shows no sign of the sclerosis that afflicts great powers at the end of their time.

On the other hand it is true to say that we are now moving out of a world dominated by a single superpower into a much more multipolar world. I think the future world might going to look much more like the 19th century's Concert of Europe, where Britain's role was always to play to the equilibrium. In my view America will still for some time to come be the greatest of the world powers, but it will not be dominating on a superpower basis.

This means a number of quite serious things for Europe. First of all, Americans are having other interests in the world, not just the Atlantic relationship. My guess is that Europe will be less important to any future U.S. president, including Barack Obama, than it has been to any past president, including George W. Bush. We are going to see an America which is not withdrawing or isolationist, but that is reassessing its priorities.

... and European Unity

We are seeing a rising China and other economic powers in the East. If we in Europe do not realise that in the face of this the right response from us is to deepen our institutions of integration, particularly in foreign affairs and defence, we are fools. We have sheltered behind Bush's unilateralism, we wanted him to be multilateral, while completely failing to create the institutions in Europe that could deal with a more multilateral world. My worry is that when Obama does move in a more multilateral direction, we suddenly discover that we have not got the institutions to play on such a basis.

Power and Governance

I hope the new U.S. administration realises that the real destabiliser is the amount of power that can exist unregulated on the global stage. There is a rule about democracy and peace: where power goes, governance must follow. On the world stage, my guess is that this is not going to be done by new international organisations such as the UN, but that it is going to be tackled increasingly by treaty-based organisations in which the real power balance is on negotiating between the different powers.

I think the Americans prefer these to UN-like organisations. But you need both. The UN is probably better as the forum for world opinion, the developer of international law, the legitimiser of international action, but by and large it is not a good organisation in putting in charge of executive action. I prefer 'coalitions of the willing', operating under UN legitimacy to deal with a number of the world's problems.

What about NATO?

The mission in Afghanistan is a very clear example: NATO at present acts as the subcontracted organisation (coalition of the willing, if you like, or regional security structure) of the UN Security Council. Now, if you ask me: is that a better option for addressing the failures in Afghanistan than UN blue helmets in a position like in Bosnia, the answer is yes. The UN is good at more permissive environments, where there are no bullets flying about, but the UN has not got command, logistic, and intelligence structures. There is no-one else other than NATO able to operate in a non-permissive environment. Yet you have to increase the capabilities of other regional organisations as well, such as the African Union.

Lord Ashdown visited The Hague on 21 January 2009 at the invitation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The author thanks Ms. Heleen Baartmans in arranging the interview.

Would you like to react? Mail the editor at info@atlcom.nl.