

## **Foreign Troops and Peace in Afghanistan**

The President of the Interim Administration for Afghanistan has recently made great efforts to convince the international community to increase the deployment of foreign troops in his country. In doing so, he responded to the mounting instability in Kabul and other regions. Foreign troops, he and most of his cabinet colleagues argue, should help maintain peace and security throughout Afghanistan, at least during the crucial first months of the peace process. They should therefore be deployed not only in Kabul but as well extend to other regions of the country.

This is a policy that bears considerable risks not only for the international community but also for the Interim Administration and its successor administrations. Before sending off more and more international troops into Afghanistan, the risks of this policy should be carefully assessed and other possible options for maintaining peace and security carefully considered. This paper tries to highlight the dangers for an extended presence of an international peacekeeping force in Afghanistan and to provide some thoughts about alternative options.

### ***Can foreign troops guarantee security and stability?***

The extent of general popular Afghan support for the deployment of foreign peacekeeping troops in their country came as a great surprise to many Afghanistan observers. This appears to contradict historical experience of these fiercely independent people, greatly distrustful of any foreign interference. The seeming change of heart among Afghans reflects a deep wish for peace and a profound disenchantment with their own leaders. It was this perception of being welcome, combined with the fear of another round of inter-ethnic and inter-communal fighting, that led to the deployment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in January of this year.

However, it remains to be seen for how long the popular support for foreign troops will last. The deployment of international troops inside Afghanistan remains an extremely hazardous undertaking and could easily prove to be a mistake. Expectations among Afghans are high and it is doubtful that these can be met by ISAF. The disadvantages of such troop deployment could outweigh possible advantages. Indeed, ISAF could become the Achilles' heel for the peace process and in the end contribute, albeit unintentionally, to the destabilisation of the new Afghan government instead of to its protection. There are a number of aspects that would support such view:

#### 1. Risk of a widening credibility gap

Most Afghans associate foreign troops with the hope that their arrival will bring peace, security and a degree of fairness while helping to create an environment for economic development. But would foreign troops ever be able to meet these expectations? Isn't there the risk that under the watchful eyes of the totally unaware foreign soldiers politically motivated rivalries and crime will continue to spread? Ultimately, Afghans will resent foreign troops driving through their streets in expensive equipment while neither their collective security nor their individual lot has improved.

ISAF will most likely prove ineffective to stop the rising crime and (political?) murders in Kabul. The recent murder of a Minister at Kabul airport that is effectively under British control and only about one mile from ISAF Headquarters is making the limitations of foreign troop interventions all too apparent. Even worse, foreign troops are likely to be drawn into incidents such as the recent shooting of civilians in Kabul. This, or even mishandled crowd control at football games, could set off a spark that ignites a fire that could run out of control.

Outside Kabul the task to maintain security will be even more daunting. In many regions of Afghanistan, the situation is back to what it was prior to the arrival of the Taleban. The re-emergence of warlords, militia commanders or simply bandits mixed with local conflicts and ethnic resentment will be problems impossible to solve for any international force.

ISAF's credibility could quickly fade as a consequence of unchecked lootings, roadblocks, gun battles and murders. Public attitudes could change quickly and initial hopes could turn into disillusion. In addition, ISAF could be more and more identified with the continuing war efforts of the coalition forces in southern Afghanistan. The increased awareness of civilian casualties could make ISAF look like part of foreign occupation forces. This is a pattern that has been too common in Afghan history to ignore.

## 2. Risk of increased vulnerability to attacks

It is true that the coalition forces so far have had very few casualties. The reason behind this is that the coalition carried out its war safely from the air or employed Afghan forces to do the fighting for them on the ground. And of those coalition forces that were eventually deployed on the ground, few were ever engaged in real combat. Those that were could rely on aggressive rules of engagement, uninhibited air superiority and an overwhelming firepower.

For ISAF the situation will be very different indeed. Their mission is to maintain peace and security on the ground. In order to do this, they will have to patrol the streets of Kabul, including patrolling at night. This will turn them into easy targets. A simple RPG or hand grenade could cause serious casualties to an ISAF patrol and a mine could blow up a military vehicle. In fact, anyone opposed to the anti-terrorist war inside Afghanistan, to the peace process or simply to the presence of foreign troops must see the deployment of ISAF on the ground as a "golden" opportunity. They could achieve a great impact with relatively little effort; two or three attackers would be enough to create political shivers throughout Europe. Opposition to ISAF will not necessarily come from remaining Taleban or al Qaida groups. Opposition and hostility could come from any quarter, even from political factions close to the present Interim Administration.

The initial intimidation that American precision bombing had caused among those fighting on the side of the Taleban is wearing thin. Militant Afghan opposition groups are learning to adapt to the threat of new military technology and will get bolder. In any case, American air cover will slowly phase out and will be withdrawn completely in the not too distant future. In this case, ISAF could find itself without effective air cover. If attacked, ISAF would be forced into the defence. Hence, ISAF would have to take measures to protect itself instead of the new Interim Administration or the general Afghan population. Such security measures would not necessarily endear ISAF to the local population. As ISAF consists of forces from 17 nations, the tolerance levels of respective troop contingents will vary greatly. Relatively minor incidents could weaken the unity of the force and with it the chance of a credible response.

Should ISAF expand to other parts of the country, the risks of serious attacks would increase exponentially. In fact, outside Kabul foreign troops are more likely to get drawn into heavier armed clashes with or among Afghan armed groups.

## 3. Risk of getting muddled in local conflicts

The inclination of Afghans to accept the deployment of foreign peacekeeping troops is motivated by very different and opposing interests. Even inside the Interim Administration reasons for supporting foreign troops vary. ISAF could be caught in inner-Afghan conflicts it can neither understand nor control nor manage.

It is probably of little surprise that members of the Rome Group in the Interim Administration welcome ISAF troops. They need protection as many of them had not been in Afghanistan for a long time and cannot rely on tangible support from within the country. Members of the Northern Alliance on the other hand might hope that ISAF helps them control regions where otherwise their mainly Tajik forces could not go to. In this context, it was only logical that the

Minister of Defence, seconded by the Foreign Minister, requested that ISAF troops be deployed in Jelalabad and Kandahar to repress what they perceived as civil disturbances and crime. Contrary to the government, the Pashtoon population may hope that ISAF will free them of the threat of American air strikes and help prevent an encroachment of Northern Alliance forces in their areas. Within each region, local leaders will expect ISAF to become their "ally" and choose their side in local conflicts.

#### 4. Risk of being trapped

Looking at history, it was relatively easy for foreign forces to enter Afghanistan but extremely difficult to leave it again. This fate, that befell previous attempts to prop up a new Afghan leadership with foreign military forces, could soon be shared by ISAF. Instead of solving problems, ISAF might find out that problems have only started to emerge and that one problem will lead to another. Each time this will prompt renewed calls for expanding the force in size, for extending the time of deployment and for increasing the areas of operations. Once there, ISAF will not be able to pull out without risking abandoning a fragile Afghan government. This could lead to repeated renewal of ISAF's mandate. Certainly, an early retreat could be seen as defeat and cause the collapse of the entire peace process.

In a reaction to recent disturbances in Kabul, Karzai already made public that he considered to "enhance the mandate" to give "a more direct role" to ISAF in combating violence. This would be a sure formula for an international force to get deeper and deeper involved and result in an Afghan government that is ever more dependent on foreign protection. In any case, a public call for more foreign protection reveals the weakness of an isolated political leadership rather than political foresight.

#### 5. Risk of logistical break-downs

None of the troop-contributing countries have the logistical capacity to support their forces in times of difficulties inside of Afghanistan. Already the stories of repeated delays in transporting troops into Afghanistan indicated serious logistic weaknesses. The United States, the only country with the capacity to provide such logistic support, is already not very enthusiastic about any role in ISAF. This hesitant support could further fade once the US ends its military operations in Afghanistan. In this case, the troop-contributing countries would have to depend even more on the cooperation of neighbouring countries. However, should developments in Afghanistan deteriorate, this cooperation could become increasingly difficult to secure. ISAF could find itself in the very tricky situation of having an unreliable logistical support. This problem would increase significantly if ISAF operations were to expand into other areas of Afghanistan.

#### 6. Risk of large sinking costs

The deployment of foreign troops in Afghanistan costs huge amounts of money to Western taxpayers. Although no exact amounts are known, the "joke" in Kabul was that the airlift of British troops alone cost more than the funds needed to pay the entire Afghan civil service – funds that were urgently needed at the time. The money spent on an international peacekeeping force might be better spent on rebuilding a national civil service, a national security force or on providing basic social services. The peace dividend of those alternative investments might simply be greater.

#### 7. Risk of weakening international political resolve

To maintain large numbers of troops for long periods in far-away country such as Afghanistan will demand great political resolve at home. But does such a political resolve really exist and if yes, would it endure when Afghanistan is no longer high on the political agenda? And would the political determination survive serious casualties or further cost increases? The answer to all these questions is probably no.

Already the very slow deployment of ISAF to Kabul and the very public discussion about which country would take over from the British command radiates a serious lack of political will that will not be lost on the Afghan population. It is still not clear who will replace British

troops and even more importantly who will pay the bill. During the first months, the international community indicated the possibility of even extending ISAF to other parts of Afghanistan. Given the Kabul experience, is this still a realistic option? And how many additional troops would be needed and where would they come from at a time when the long-term future of the Kabul deployment is not even secured.

The British mandate expires in two months. This would not only mean a change of overall command but also result in the withdrawal of most, if not all their troops. Many of the soldiers now engaged in Afghanistan lack the professionalism of British troops. The possibility of a Turkish command would hardly reassure many Afghans, and especially the Pashtoon population, that ISAF is a neutral force. Not only could a Turkish command risk to heighten the tension between the North and the South of the country but also provoke potential opposition from Afghanistan's two main neighbours: Pakistan and Iran.

The political determination to maintain troops in Afghanistan could be adversely affected by other international events. Public opinion in Europe is getting increasingly wary of American threats to extend the war against terrorism to other countries and regions. This could further undermine European solidarity with the United States and with its enthusiasm for expensive troop deployments in Afghanistan.

#### 8. Risk of exposing the Afghan leadership

The greatest risk factor is that the survival of the Interim Administration will depend more and more on ISAF. Increasingly, the Interim Administration and in particular its President and the Rome Group will be identified with being kept in power by foreign troops. This will be fine as long as the hopes of the Afghan population are kept alive that also they will gain from the foreign military presence. However, as there will be frustrations along the way, the dependence on foreign troops could become very harmful for the political process. Should foreign troops come under pressure and start to withdraw the survival of the Interim Administration and the entire peace process would be put into question. With the fading of political will to maintain foreign troops or to allow them to engage into serious fighting, also the fate of the Afghan Administration will fade.

Indeed, nobody has seen this clearer than Hamid Karzai himself. During his travel to the United States and Europe the issue of the future command, the maintenance of ISAF troops and their expansion to other areas of Afghanistan has probably been one of the most pressing issues on his agenda. But given the hands-off approach by the US Administration to international peacekeeping troops and the lukewarm response from the British Foreign Secretary, he would be well advised to consider other options.

#### 9. Risk of being haunted by history

It is history that conveys a final thought of caution. The present circumstances are unpleasantly reminiscent of events dating back to the first Anglo-Afghan war of 1838-1842. Also then, the dominant power, the British, considered that the ruling Afghan monarch at the time was a threat to her peace and security. Also then, this power decided to oust the ruler by force and put the "rightful" Afghan heir, Shah Shuja on the throne. Also then, the decision to restore a new leader to the throne in Kabul was taken outside Afghanistan. Also then, a foreign army opened the way to Kabul for a new leadership. Also then, a foreign force stayed behind to maintain security and to prop up the newly installed ruler. Also then, the foreign forces relied on their superior weaponry and tactics. Also then, joint sports games and other social events were organised in Kabul with the local leadership. Also then, the perception was that the new government and the British forces were well accepted by the local population. But one day this all changed and resulted in what is now termed a "signal catastrophe". Certainly, the situation is different today – but the question is how much different?

## **What can the international community do to support security?**

If ISAF is not a solution for creating a secure and peaceful environment throughout Afghanistan, one will have to consider alternative options. One such option is to "afghanize" the responsibility for security as fast as possible. Also this will not be a perfect solution. There are simply no perfect solutions for Afghanistan. The "Afghan" solution at least, promises to be less risky, much cheaper and possibly more sustainable<sup>1</sup>.

### **Nation building by coalition forces**

The hope for Afghanistan was that with a successful war of the anti-terrorist coalition to remove the Taleban regime and destroy the al Qaida network, this troubled country would get a fair chance to finally achieving peace. Paradoxically, it may now turn out that the continued war of the coalition, or at least the way this war is conducted, poses the greatest threat to the peace process.

In an effort to minimize their own casualties the coalition has supported or organized Afghan forces to do the fighting on the ground. In the wake many of the old-guard Afghan commanders and leaders were brought back to Afghanistan and provided with weapons and funds. Unfortunately, several of those commanders were simply warlords with very bad track records. They were responsible for the terrible years of anarchy during the early 1990's. During the chaos many of them had become rich. Under their rule, human rights abuses, smuggling and illicit drug trading were common. With the war of the coalition, these warlords have become powerful again and pose potentially a great liability for the new Afghan administration. Despite their pledges of allegiance, it is doubtful that those former warlords will turn out to be loyal to the central government and become more responsible local leaders.

Furthermore, the sudden collapse of the Taleban regime created a general vacuum that allowed many petty local warlords and militia commanders to take control of stretches of the country. Armed gangs terrorise and loot again villagers, maintain roadblocks and extort "taxes". In many parts of the country the security situation appears today comparable to the worst times of anarchy that gripped Afghanistan during the early 1990's. To make things worse, the war of the coalition has brought about a new influx of weapons and money into the country and today more Afghans are under arms than during previous years. Once their use for the coalition will diminish, these disenchanting fighters will have few other alternatives but to swell the ranks of those warlords and armed gangs.

As an upshot of the prolonged war, Afghanistan is today virtually divided into two parts: the South, which is subjected to continued military operations by the coalition and the North and centre that are governed by various local forces. Unfortunately, this division overlaps roughly with ethnic partitions. This could have potentially very damaging effects for the future of the country. It will have the result that the Pashtoon population of Afghanistan suffers much greater human and physical losses than other Afghan ethnic groups, which could heighten further ethnic mistrust and hostilities. Due to this, Pashtoons are likely to be more isolated from the political process and this in turn could prove a threat to the peace process for a long time to come.

If the coalition forces are not careful, they could find themselves in the awkward circumstances that they have won the battle but lost the war in Afghanistan. They too might find out that it was much easier to get into Afghanistan than to get out again. The coalition has not reached all of its war aims. The larger part of the Taleban and al Qaida leadership,

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<sup>1</sup> To remain with history, the only successful attempt in recent history to take power in Kabul from outside the country was that of Nadir Shah. Although supported with weapons and money, he conducted his invasion by relying on Afghan forces only. No foreign troops were involved.

including their respective heads, has not been apprehended. Although one can assume that much of their infrastructure has been destroyed, it remains to be seen how much of those two organizations will recover once US and other troops have left the country. The coalition's only choice is therefore to leave a stable country behind that can prevent the resurrection of those forces that it came to destroy. There will be a need to switch tactics and, ironically, this would mean that the US army would have to engage in some kind of "nation building".

The main responsibility for creating a stable environment in Afghanistan lies with the coalition forces. Before leaving they will have to rein in the militia commanders they have brought back to Afghanistan, they must make sure that weapons are collected and fighters either decommissioned or incorporated into a future Afghan security force. In order to do this the coalition should help the central government to build up a national security force for Afghanistan that could fill the vacuum once the coalition wants to withdraw. The coalition must also help building up a future administration in the areas they control and consider ways of ensuring that the Pashtoon population fully participates in the peace process.

Compared to the on-going coalition campaign, that according to some news reports cost about one billion dollar per day, such new tactics would be relatively cheap.

### **Redefining the role of ISAF**

ISAF is already deployed and this can no longer be reversed without risking an adverse political chain reaction in Afghanistan. However, the tasks of ISAF must be redefined and clearer and less ambiguous objectives established. Its role as a de-facto police force for Kabul must be phased out as quickly as possible and plans to deploy the ISAF as peacekeepers to other parts of Afghanistan should be abandoned. The aim is to limit the need for interventions by foreign troops and reduce the risks of a prolonged presence in Afghanistan.

Instead, ISAF should concentrate helping the Afghan Interim Administration building a new national Afghan security force by providing training for officers and NCOs and by equipping them. One could envision that ISAF should also assist during the initial deployment of the Afghan force in Kabul and successively throughout the country by providing logistic support. In this case, ISAF's presence in the respective regions should be limited to the initial phase of setting up a new garrison for the Afghan security force.

If not already done, an urgent task would be to train, equip a small Presidential Guard with the aim to protect the presidential palace, ministries and other important central government

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There are plenty of unemployed young Afghans with fighting experience only too happy to join a force that provides a livelihood and regular income. The times that those Afghan fighters were driven by ideological motives and ethnic devotions are long gone and there is no reason to believe that those wild Afghans could not be turned into loyal soldiers.

However, present plans to re-create an Afghan army might be misplaced, at least for now. The most important issues are not to defend Afghanistan's national integrity, guard its borders or to participate in future UN peacekeeping mission abroad (as suggested in a proposal made by ISAF!). The most pressing problem for the new Afghan administration is to increase the internal security within the country and to prevent the re-emergence of warlords, armed gangs, looting and murder. There is presently no danger that Afghanistan will be split up among its neighbours but there is the danger that Afghanistan slips back into the anarchy of the early 1990's that would make it ungovernable in future. This would require a somewhat different Afghan force than a traditional army.

In fact, many Afghans might perceive a recreated Afghan army as a threat that would increase their "natural" tendencies to refuse to co-operate with the Kabul government. Memories of a central "Kabul" Afghan army that fought Afghan mujahedeen and terrorised the rural population is still very present in mind of many Afghans. Given the present distribution of power in Kabul, any new Afghan army would be seen to be dominated by Tajik forces, or at least by Jamiat commanders. Should such an army move south, it would surely meet open resistance. The same might even be true for areas in the north and west of the country that are on the surface loyal to the Interim Administration. Therefore, to recreate a new Kabul army with the aim of crushing local resistance to the new Afghan administration could risk exploding into a major conflict.

Afghanistan has always been fragmented with little control over the regions by the centre. The distrust towards any government in Kabul has only increased during the war years and the recent coalition campaign. To try now to use the presence of foreign troops to establish central control through a Kabul-based army would be tantamount to failure. In order not to raise inter-ethnic and inter-regional tensions, one should therefore consider a "soft approach" to national security. Being weak and one day without any foreign military support, the Interim Administration might be well advised to prevent head-on confrontations and instead use the time for negotiated arrangements.

It may therefore be a better idea to follow a "soft approach" and create a kind of national security force based on regionally based security forces with the principle aim of supporting regional governors. To prevent inter-regional conflicts or acts of revenge, troops for the security force should be recruited from within the region in which they will operate. Their composition should hence reflect the local ethnic fabric. The aim of such an Afghan security force would be to maintain peace and security within the respective region. They would hence act more as a kind of "gendarmarie" - an armed and garrisoned police force - than a national army. Such local gendarmerie would be the only way to prevent anarchy and warlordism in Afghanistan without risking upsetting local sensitivities. There is a historical analogue. After the fiasco of the Anglo-Afghan war, the British initiated a system by which the Pashtoons tribes of the North-Western frontier were controlled by troops raised from those regions. This made the force (the Frontier Scouts) more acceptable and seemed to have generally worked to provide peace and security.

In order to prevent a complete loss of control by the central authorities under the "soft approach" the proposed Afghan security forces would undergo joint training, have a national officer and NCO corps as well as being centrally equipped and provisioned. But most importantly, the Afghan security forces would be centrally funded and salaried for the troops paid by Kabul. Money is a very strong argument to remain in control.

Afghanistan will not grow into a nation-state as we know it from Europe for a long time to come. Its regions will keep their relative independence from Kabul. Even under the then peaceful conditions the former King Zahir Shah could not travel to all parts of the country unopposed. Why should this suddenly change after so many years of war and anarchy? In any case, the national unity will not come from strong national army but has to grow slowly.

Here economic assistance is probably a much more important factor – and more peaceful one – to reach this aim.

The initial plans by the Ministry of Defence called for an army of over 200,000 men. In trying to justify a large army for Afghanistan, it argued that between 500,000 and 700,000 Afghans currently carry arms. But for the purpose of considering the need of a full-fledged army versus a security force it may be useful to distinguish between Afghans under arms and Afghans with arms, meaning between fighters that are part of one or the other armed faction and those Afghans that only keep a gun at home for their own protection.

Before the coalition campaign started the best estimates of those under arms amounted to only about 60,000 men: 45,000 men under Taleban command and about 15,000 under the command of the Northern Alliance. The Taleban forces have now disintegrated and many of their fighters may have changed sides. This does not increase their overall numbers. However, since the coalition forces started supporting the Northern Alliance and equipping and funding other “anti-Taleban” forces, the total number of Afghans under arms must have considerably increased. Only the coalition would be able to estimate this increase in armed Afghan fighters. Nonetheless, in taking all factors together, the total numbers of those under arms will be well below the 100,000 benchmark. Instead of confronting those fighters, one should better try to incorporate as many of them as possible into the Afghan security forces. This is better done by attraction than confrontation and one will not need a full-fledged army for this purpose.

It is far more difficult to estimate the numbers of guns and arms owned by individuals that are not affiliated to any armed group. The Taleban had been quite successful in disarming Afghan “civilians”. Apparently this disarmament was more successful in the South than in the North of the country. The reason for this could have been that the minorities in the North had little trust in the Taleban and therefore preferred to conceal their weapons. Although nobody will have any precise idea how many of those weapons are still around, one can safely assumed that most of these weapons are rather small arms and many of them are old. It is also here questionable if one needs an army to collect them. Indeed, given the experience of the Taleban, the general distrust towards a central army might make this task more difficult.

The argument is not made that Afghanistan should not have its own army. Quite to the contrary, Afghanistan will need an army. But during the initial years of the peace process, Afghanistan would be better served by a kind of security force.

An Afghan security force would also give more time to build a proper Afghan police force. The present German proposal, made after a four-day mission, appears rather naïve. The proposal anticipates training 3,200 police officers at two-week courses and dispatching them in groups of 100 police officers to each of the Afghan provinces. Although it is envisaged to equip them it is not clear who will pay them and to what local structures they will report to. It remains also debatable if such scattering of small groups of police officers would do any good except enticing those new police officers to “organize” their own income. The price tag of US\$ 100 million appears vast for such relatively modest outcome and failure could only lead to more donor frustration.

### ***The time factor***

The traditional fighting season in Afghanistan is the summer. This could also be the time that the American air cover is no longer in place. These two elements will make the coming summer a crucial season for Afghanistan that could determine the future of the peace process. This leaves only the winter and therefore little time to prepare for likely disturbances in the summer.



It is probably much easier, faster and less expensive to build an Afghan security force than to re-create a national army or a national police force. If, as proposed, the security forces will be based on local recruits and hence be less controversial, the Interim Administration could start developing this in a relatively short time by building this on existing mujahedeen forces. It would however, need the outside financial support for paying of such force, for equipping it and for initiating its training.

### ***Security as part of a package***

The success of the UN sponsored peace process will not only depend on security issues but also on other dimensions of the peace process to advance at an even and co-ordinated pace:

- The political dimension to increase the acceptability of a central Afghan government to the majority of Afghans;
- The humanitarian dimension to ensure the survival of the large vulnerable sections of the Afghan population and
- The recovery dimensions to extend a tangible peace dividend to ordinary Afghans through the provision of basic services throughout the country.

There is also an element that is often overlooked: providing proper and reliable information to Afghans. If it is true that the common Afghan is the main supporter of the peace process, one will have to keep him/her informed. It is therefore absolutely necessary that the UN provides support to the Radio Kabul and turns it in an objective and neutral voice in support of peace in Afghanistan. It is not sufficient to get international assistance in repairing the radio infrastructures but one will need to train and financially Afghan support journalists and reporters to do a better job and gain the trust of the Afghan public.

However, the recent developments have made security issues the most pressing aspect of the peace process. Unless one will able to bring the security situation under control, it may no longer be possible to conduct a credible Emergency Loya Jirga, endangering the credibility of the future Transitional Authority. It would also become more difficult to deliver humanitarian assistance and many donors could withhold the billions of dollars in development aid that were promised in Tokyo. To make the right choices in the area of security could therefore be the key question in salvaging a fragile peace process.

We owe it also to the Afghan men and women who have taken the risk to move the peace process forward to be honest and not to promise an international security arrangement that may neither work and nor survive a serious challenge.