

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS REVIEW
VOLUME XXI, NUMBER 2 • SPRING 2013

Road Reconstruction in Post-Conflict Afghanistan: A Cure or a Curse?

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After the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, the United States and the international community announced their full support for rebuilding Afghanistan's infrastructure and bringing a sustained peace to the war-torn country. Since then, Afghanistan has become a major recipient of international aid, security and military resources, totaling around \$286.4 billion, or \$9,426 per Afghan citizen. Due to Afghanistan's landlocked geography, restoration of highways has been a priority for the Afghan government and international donors. Road projects remain the second largest recipient of aid money after security expenditure, according to the Integrity Watch Afghanistan. Donor agencies believe that these roads will connect the capital city of Kabul to regional centers and extend the central government's influence in bringing peace and economic prosperity to the rest of the country. This paper examines the contribution of road reconstruction development projects in bringing peace to Afghanistan.

This paper analyzes four major road reconstruction projects supported by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). The first two projects discussed in the paper were designed by USAID and JICA and contracted to the Louis Berger Group (LBG) of New Jersey. The Afghan government has had no say in the design and implementation of these particular projects. The latter two were supported through World Bank and ADB loan packages disbursed to the government of Afghanistan.

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The World Bank and ADB designed the projects and gave their full technical support to the Afghan government, enabling them to effectively contract out the projects to international or local construction companies. Before analyzing these projects, it is important to highlight the situation of Afghan roads in a historical context.

Abbreviations and Acronyms

AACA	Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority
ADB	Asian Development Bank
IDB	Islamic Development Bank
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
LBG	The Louis Berger Group
MPW	Ministry of Public Works
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitations and Development
PMU	Project Management Unit
PPTA	Project Preparatory Technical Assistance
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

Situation Assessment

Between 1979 and 1989, the former Soviet Union had supported a plethora of road projects in Afghanistan and built much of the country's road network. This included the Ring Road system, which circles around the country connecting the capital city of Kabul to major cities. However, three decades of war, starting after the invasion of the Soviet Union and followed closely by civil wars and the rise of the Taliban in the 1990's, largely destroyed infrastructure throughout the country. While some road improvement programs occurred during the Taliban regime in the late 1990s, the Ring Road was reduced to a dirt track in many areas.¹ The

duration of conflict and neglect of infrastructure resulted in large-scale deterioration to extensive sections of roads, bridges, and tunnels. According to the most recent road condition survey conducted in 1994, a mere 17% of the roads were considered to be in good condition.ⁱⁱ Road conditions in pre-9/11 Afghanistan are measured in terms of travel time, as addressed in Table 1 below.ⁱⁱⁱ

Following the 9/11 attacks, the United States and its allies joined forces to dislodge the Taliban, who had harbored the perpetrators of the attacks. Once the United States ousted the Taliban, the U.S. government and several other nations committed large sums of money for humanitarian and development assistance programs to rebuild the war-torn country.

Table 1: Travel time on the Ring Road Network

	Length (km)	Travel Time (hrs)	Avg. Speed (km/hr.)
Kabul – Kandahar	506	20	25
Kabul – Mazar	399	15	27
Kandahar – Herat	560	8.5	64

After the invasion, USAID estimated that Afghanistan had approximately 50 kilometers (~31 miles) of paved roads.^{iv} At the same time, it conducted an Afghanistan Civil Infrastructure Assessment and presented a final report to the Afghan government. The Civil Assessment identified the reconstruction of major roads, including the Ring Road, as priorities for Afghanistan’s civil infrastructure. Furthermore, the ADB carried out a road condition survey in 2001, and prepared a report to the Board of Directors suggesting that Afghanistan was in dire need of rebuilding road infrastructure because “damaged roads have become bottlenecks to the movement of people and goods.”^v Without roads, the country’s economy would remain at a standstill. People would not be able to move easily from one place to another and local products would not make it to the market on

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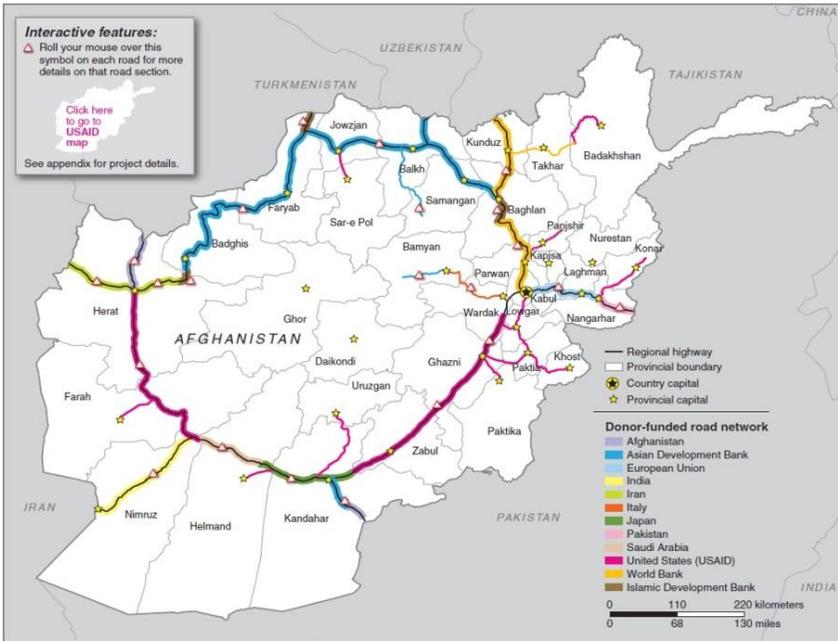
time. Based on these surveys and on recommendations from USAID and ADB, the Afghan government and international donors proposed a road network for Afghanistan, which they had hoped to complete by 2015.^{vi} The proposed network identified the country's major roads, and categorized them into four following types:

- **Regional Highways (Ring Road):** It is called the Ring Road because the road circles the country, connecting the capital city of Kabul to major cities of Kandahar, Mazar, and Herat. This paper concentrates on the reconstruction of Regional Highways (hereafter referred to as Ring Roads).
- **National Highways:** These highways connect the capitals of the 34 provinces to the Regional Highway Network.
- **Provincial Roads:** These roads link provincial capitals to district headquarters.
- **Rural Roads:** These small roads may be paved, gravel or cobblestone.

Since 2001, international development agencies have donated approximately \$3 billion towards rebuilding and expanding the Regional Highway alone. Of the total donor commitment for the 3,200 kilometer-long Ring Road, USAID has committed about 42%, followed by the ADB (24%), JICA (6%) and the World Bank (6%).^{vii} As of 2013, the United States and seven other donors have completed their portions of the Regional Highway. Only Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Development Bank have yet to complete their share of the project. Once a small (143 km) portion of the road is constructed, with funding from Saudi Arabia and IDB, the Ring Road project will be completed. This portion of the road will be complete by the end of 2013. The following map (Figure 1) shows the Ring Road project, and highlights each donor's contribution to rebuilding the network.

Projects

Figure 1: Donor-Funded Regional and National Highways in Afghanistan



Source: GAO analysis of data from the Consultative Group for the Transport Sector and USAID.
 Note: Data valid as of February 2008.

In 2002, USAID funded the first major Ring Road project. The Kabul – Kandahar Road, which connects its two namesake cities, is one of the most important highways in the country. Stretching 482 kilometers (300 miles) to the south, the road holds the country together. Initially, the Bush administration rejected the Afghan government’s proposal for rebuilding the highway, arguing that USAID had never carried out road reconstruction projects in post-conflict regions. However, after realizing the importance of this road and its impact on Afghan lives, USAID contracted the LBG to reconstruct the Kabul – Kandahar road as part of a massive infrastructure initiative.

By early 2003 this highway had become an important U.S. goal and USAID and LBG were under daily pressure from Washington to

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demonstrate progress. LBG engineers and workers remained committed to the deadline despite killings, attacks, helicopter crashes, and supply shortages. At the end of 2003, LBG completed the project and handed it over to the Afghan government. The reconstruction of this highway, originally estimated to cost \$162 million, had a final price tag of \$311 million.

JICA funded a portion of the Kabul – Kandahar road, known as Section G, covering approximately 50 kilometers (31 miles) of the road with a cost of \$29 million.^{viii} It also employed LBG to implement the project. In both cases LBG subcontracted with Indian and South African companies, who in turn subcontracted with local Afghan firms who again found additional subcontractors.

ADB funded the second largest Ring Road reconstruction project, and after its full assessment of Afghan road condition in 2001, agreed to fund the reconstruction of a 376-kilometer (234 miles) road from Pole-Khomri in the northern region to Leman City in the northwest region. The project was separated into five grants. This paper will only focus on the third installment which was invested in rebuilding the road connecting the cities of Qaysar and Ankhoy. This portion of the Ring Road stretches 210 kilometers (130 miles) and cost nearly \$120 million, inclusive of contingencies and the interest.^{ix} ADB financed 100% of the total project cost. The loan has a 40-year term including a 10 year grace period, and an interest rate of 1 percent per year. Before granting the loan to the Afghan government, ADB extensively consulted a wide range of stakeholders, including the Embassy of Sweden in Afghanistan, the United States Army Corps of Engineers, the European Commission, the World Bank and the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). The project was implemented by a project management unit (PMU) established by the Afghan Ministry of Public Works, and ADB, which included five staff members from the Afghan ministry and one from ADB. In addition to the grant, ADB offered its full technical support to the Afghan government through a project preparatory technical assistance program (PPTA). The PPTA extensively researched the socioeconomic impact of the road and shared its assessments with the Afghan government.^x The

Afghan Ministry of Public Works hired the Korean construction company Samwhan and China Railway Shisiju to implement this massive project. They completed the reconstruction of the Qaysar – Ankhoy road in 2007.^{xi}

The fourth highway project from Kabul to Doshi was funded by the World Bank. This road covers a critical section of the northern Ring Road that connects Kabul with eight northern provinces. The Afghan government was granted a \$64 million loan for restoration of this 175-kilometer long (108 miles) road, and the project was completed in 2005.^{xii} Unlike the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank hired LBG, the same construction company that worked on the Kabul – Kandahar highway project funded by USAID and JICA. LBG also helped with reports and detailed documents on engineering specifications for the actual construction phase. In addition, the World Bank selected the Afghan Assistance Coordination Authority (AACCA) – an independent body that is responsible for management of development assistance to Afghanistan – to facilitate a transparent procurement process and financial management. AACCA procured workers, goods, and services and managed contract disbursements. The Afghan government was only responsible for monitoring of technical assistance and project administration undertaken by MPW. However, unlike ADB, the World Bank gave the Afghan government a limited role in the design and implementation of the project.

Analysis

Overall, these projects have been successful in terms of their socioeconomic impact on communities living along the Ring Road. Final reports, auditor assessments, and donor evaluations indicate that the Ring Road project (north and south) has had a positive impact on the local economy. It has increased efficiency through ease of movement and transportation, and has contributed to a significant rise in enterprise and incomes within the roads' zone of influence (an area 15 km (9 miles) wide on either side of the road). Due to lower transportation costs, farmers are now able to expand their market far beyond local communities and increase their bottom line.^{xiii}

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In addition to its economic impact, the Ring Road has provided many positive social impacts.^{xiv} Many social services, including schools and medical facilities, have opened in communities within the zone of influence. Villagers are able to transport their patients to provincial capitals or Kabul for better treatment. The increased number of schools and improved access to transportation has enabled more female children to attend school.

These benefits, however, came at the price of project costs that are substantially higher than originally appraised. The reasons for these high costs, according to a senior Ministry of Public Works official, include poor planning and fragile security conditions. For example, the cost of Qaysar–Ankhoy project funded by ADB increased from \$95 million to \$120 million because the design of the project was incomplete prior to the implementation process. The official also mentioned that other donors, including USAID and the World Bank, have faced similar problems.^{xv}

Poor security in Afghanistan is another contributing factor to increased costs of road reconstruction projects. These roads have become prime targets for the Taliban. Insurgents have attacked construction sites, destroyed vehicles, and killed or kidnapped workers for ransom since the international community stepped into Afghanistan. As of March 2008, 162 contractors associated with USAID road programs had been killed, and 202 had been injured in attacks since 2003. Securing workers and construction material has proven to be very costly as a result of these attacks.^{xvi}

In terms of sustainability, none of the donor agencies have taken serious steps to ensure the long-term maintenance of these roads. Rather, they have ceded this responsibility to the Afghan government. However, the government has fallen short of its duties due to several factors including a lack of human and financial resources. Due to these shortcomings, the government has found it difficult to collect revenue for maintaining newly constructed roads in the absence of a comprehensive legal system.

Weak private sector capacity has also hindered this process. Donors have recommended that MPW involve the private sector in its road maintenance efforts. However, in 2006, when the ministry requested bids for maintenance of the Kabul–Kandahar road, it did not receive a single bid. Since the Afghan government had not been able to maintain newly reconstructed roads, the European Commission and USAID pledged to fund maintenance on a temporary basis until 2012. The World Bank also announced that it would fund a maintenance program after 2012 estimated to cost \$72 million annually.

Impact of Road Reconstruction on Security

The ultimate objectives driving these post-conflict reconstruction projects are to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a failed state and posing a threat to global security. It is important to analyze these four projects and determine if they were designed from the lens of conflict prevention. Karl Eikenberry, former U.S. military commander and Ambassador in Afghanistan, once famously stated, “Where the road ends, the Taliban begins.”^{xvii} Does his claim hold true?

In 2007, a *New York Times* article painted a grim picture of the security situation on the Kabul – Kandahar road (the southern Ring Road – which was built by USAID and JICA), writing that “Highway 1 [Kabul – Kandahar road] remains bedeviled by danger, extortion and treachery.”^{xviii} Continued police corruption and insurgent attacks sow fear among the population, and traveling on parts of this road is life-threatening. The Taliban has carried out myriad attacks on these roads while criminal activities, robberies and extortion remain commonplace. Armed groups set up roadblocks and chase their victims on motorcycles and trucks.

While final reports from donor agencies downplayed the security threat along the Ring Road, newspapers such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Telegraph* have extensively reported on instability along this road since the start of the project. In one instance, the *Telegraph* wrote in 2012 that “[The Kabul – Kandahar Ring Road] was built at massive expense as a symbol of success for the new Afghanistan, but instead the ... road has become a highway of death that shows what

has gone wrong.”^{xxix} The report added that the importance of the road had not been lost on the Taliban. Insurgents relentlessly carried out attacks along the road for the last five years. Statistics for violence on the road are sobering, with 190 bomb attacks in 2012 alone as well as 284 shootings, nearly one for every mile of road.

In addition to attacks on the southern Ring Road, the *Washington Post* reported in 2009 that Mullah Mohammad Omar, the one-eyed leader of the Taliban, had mobilized extra fighters to escalate disruptions against northern transport corridor.^{xx} Since then, the strength and frequency of Taliban attacks along the northern Ring Road have also spiked sharply. Insurgent attacks and shootings along the Kabul–Kunduz road have killed 235 people since 2009. John O’Loughlin, a U.S. military commander in the north, claimed that Taliban attacks within a five-kilometer proximity to the road have been higher than anywhere in the northern Afghanistan.^{xxi} These risks limited the highway’s contribution to socioeconomic development and are indicative of the central government’s weakness beyond Kabul.

The Ring Road Network: A Hub for Insurgent Attacks

There are several reasons as to why the Ring Road project has become a hub for insurgent attacks and criminal activities:

Corruption

The 2012 Transparency International Corruption Perception Index lists Afghanistan as one of the most corrupt countries after North Korea and Somalia.^{xxii} Corruption is deeply rooted, not only in the Afghan government, but in development projects such as the Ring Road network. Current contractual mechanisms in Afghanistan are rife with loopholes that allow the Afghan government authorities, construction companies, and donor agency officials to misuse funds.

In November 2012, the federal government hit LBG with the highest fine in a wartime contracting case, after a whistleblower revealed that the

company had overbilled the government and paid insurgents to protect the project. LBG will pay \$18.7 million in criminal penalties and \$50.6 million in civil penalties.^{xxiii} Loopholes allowed funding to end up in hands of the Taliban, while contract mechanisms enabled LBG to hire an Indian subcontractor, a joint venture of two other companies, to handle the construction. In turn, the Indian company subcontracted the project to Afghans such as Mr. Ghulam Arafat, a warlord in Khost province who didn't even have a registered company.^{xxiv} Mr. Arafat paid the Taliban \$1 million per year to provide security and guarantee that they would not attack the project.

These big road projects have empowered warlords and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Now that construction is over, people like Mr. Arafat, who made millions of dollars from the project,

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hold a greater influence along the Ring Road. Their supporters often masquerade as police officers and set up checkpoints. "They pretend to be Afghan National Police because they can get someone to stop with a Kalashnikov and half a uniform," said U.S. Army Captain Hagerman. These armed individuals rob passengers and kidnap aid workers for ransom. They also allow the Taliban to plant IEDs, and attack NATO supplies. Ultimately, these acts fuel instability and allow them to continue their criminal activities along the road.

Opium Trade

The second threat to security along the Ring Road comes from the opium trade. The United Nations has stated that "after 12 years of U.S.-led war in Afghanistan, the country remains the world's leading opium supplier, responsible for 90% of global supply."^{xxv} While the Ring Road project has had a positive effect on communities along the road, it has also posed a threat to opium smugglers especially considering that 70% of drug trafficking takes place along the main roads. When the road was a mere dirt track, there were fewer police checkpoints. Drug traffickers were able to transport opium without any interference from law enforcement

agencies. Now that the road condition has improved, there is a greater police presence, though drug traffickers continue to intimidate police through attacks on checkpoints. In some cases, local government authorities take bribes and support the traffickers.^{xxvi} While donor agencies assessed the impact of their projects in terms of economic wellbeing of communities along the road, they either failed to understand or ignored the possibility of misuse by smugglers and illicit drug traffickers. None of the four agencies have proposed any mechanism to prevent drug trafficking activities.

Local Ownership

The final and most important factor contributing to a rise in violence along the Ring Road network is that the project designers failed to understand local Afghan social structures. Afghanistan is a tribal society with the central government having far less authority in rural areas compared to local leaders. The World Bank has admitted that project implementation in a conflict-affected environment like Afghanistan requires a nuanced understanding of local social structure, including the ability to work with community leaders to ensure access to project sites and security.^{xxvii} Project such as these bring jobs to rural communities, allowing the leaders to have a voice in planning and implementation. Instead, these four projects contracted out reconstruction of the Ring Road to foreign companies. While some local contractors or warlords like Mr. Arafat were hired to implement portion of the project, local elders were largely ignored. They were hardly involved in the decision-making process and the implementation phase. These projects did not hire local workers, but brought Indians, Turks and Chinese from abroad. Local people did not feel the need to support the project because they were left out of the process.

Recommendations

To improve the effectiveness of donor-funded road reconstruction projects in mitigating violence and bringing peace to Afghanistan, the Afghan government must take the following actions. First, in order to address the corruption issue, development agencies and the Afghan government

should require contractors to implement thorough quality control measures. Current contract mechanisms should be reevaluated to ensure that humanitarian aid does not end up in the hands of the Taliban and warlords. Donor agencies and the Afghan government need to closely monitor money trails and thoroughly examine local contractors for their connections with insurgent groups.

Further, donor agencies should work closely with community leaders, not warlords. Local communities should be included in the decision-making process, and their suggestions should be incorporated in the project's design. This will empower community leaders to defend the projects and give their full support throughout the implementation and thereafter.

Finally, donor agencies and the Afghan government need to address long-term maintenance needs and require that future projects include plans to fund them. Until the Afghan government is able to establish a road maintenance program, respected donor agencies should work with the Afghan government to address urgent maintenance needs.

Conclusion

The four road reconstruction projects in post-conflict Afghanistan were not designed through the lens of conflict prevention. They have unintentionally reinforced the conflict because donor agencies did not take into account the local conflict settings. Though well-intentioned, the projects failed to achieve their desired outcomes as the Ring Road has become a hub for Taliban attacks and criminal activities. Corruption, the opium trade, and a lack of local ownership have all increased the power of warlords and insurgents and enabled more conflict along the road. Mr. Eikenberry claimed that “where the road ends, the Taliban begins.”^{xxviii} In fact, where the road starts, the Taliban begins its attacks.

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