Before ‘9/11’

In January 2000 Francesc Vendrell began nearly a decade of involvement at the highest level in Afghanistan when he was appointed the Personal Representative of the UN Secretary General. By then the UN had had a role of this sort for almost two decades, since soon after the Soviet invasion of 1979 that had plunged Afghanistan into seemingly endless war. Vendrell’s predecessor Lakhdar Brahimi had resigned after a ceasefire he negotiated between the Taliban and Northern Alliance forces broke down soon after it was signed in Tashkent. At the time the Taliban were in control of some 90% of the territory of Afghanistan, with the Northern Alliance in control of just a long thin wedge of land in the northeast, going from the Panjshir valley not far north of Kabul, all the way to the Tajik border.

Much of the narrative that follows will be familiar – the mis-steps at the beginning that led to this becoming such a long war. In the intervention that followed ‘9/11’ there was unwillingness to commit many international troops at the beginning, and little desire on the part of the
USA to work with multinational institutions like the UN, so a Northern Alliance takeover was inevitable. But how were the decisions made? Why did the Afghan intervention turn out to be so difficult? In this article, based on an extended discussion with Vendrell, he shares some details for the first time. He was there for all of the important diplomatic moments, bringing a lifetime of experience in bringing the ‘good offices’ of the UN Secretary General to attempt to resolve conflicts.

Vendrell disagreed with the way the 1999 Tashkent deal had been done, through direct talks between the two sides; he preferred indirect ‘pendulum’ talks, where a mediator shuttles between the two to try to resolve differences. And he identified another problem with the Brahimi deal. “There was no monitoring provided. And what happened was what happens to ceasefires which are non-monitored, the ceasefire broke down.” The Tashkent deal came about after talks brokered by Afghanistan’s immediate neighbours Iran, China, Pakistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, along with the USA and Russia – the ‘six-plus-two’ process. It was a far more formal mechanism working at foreign-minister level than Vendrell liked. The group had been involved in the direct talks between the Northern Alliance and Taliban that led to the Tashkent Declaration and hopes of a ceasefire. But although fine words were agreed on the need for no interference in the internal affairs of Afghanistan, the initiative had little effective impact. A week after signing the declaration, the Taliban launched an offensive.

Brahimi publicly blamed the Taliban and Pakistan for not honouring the agreement, and that made Vendrell’s job easier at the start. As Director of the Asia and Pacific Division of the UN since 1993 he had good relations with Pakistan since he had been wanting to get involved in one of the most intractable and long-running of international disputes – between Pakistan and India over Kashmir. Pakistan always sought international involvement in this so welcomed him when he came to Islamabad to the UN office in 2000. Vendrell’s Afghan mission was based there since the Taliban were not recognised as the government of Afghanistan despite controlling nearly all of the country. The UN continued to recognise the government that had taken over after the collapse of the Russian-backed government in 1992, led by the head of the Northern Alliance, Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani. Vendrell would come to see how this would complicate the transition of power when the Taliban fell in 2001.

In the late 1990s the Taliban had agreed to allow six UN offices to be set up across the country – Kabul, Kandahar, Jalalabad, Herat, Mazar-e Sharif,
and one in Northern Alliance territory in Faizabad. Vendrell was able to appoint most of the staff, since the posts had been left vacant by Brahimi. When he first met the Taliban in this role, Vendrell found them friendly enough. He describes himself as “rather partial to people who are regarded as pariahs”. They told him they preferred to deal with someone who was not a Muslim as Brahimi had been.

In dealing with complex international disputes Vendrell likes to work with small groups of countries who may have an involvement in the situation, and may be able to help. By the time he left Afghanistan he had set up several such groups. The practice internationalises the conflict, providing a forum to brainstorm issues and see what might be possible, engaging the outside world in an informal way, without the need for formal papers or commitments.

In Islamabad Vendrell launched what became known internally as the ‘luncheon group’. Unlike Brahimi’s six-plus-two, where most member countries were governed by repressive autocracies, this was a gathering of democracies – ambassadors to Pakistan from the UK, France, Italy, Japan, Sweden (then Chair of the EU), and Norway, which was a Security Council member in 2000. Although most of these ambassadors were also accredited to Kabul, they rarely went, which gave him the ability to share ideas and influence thinking on a subject which was not then on the radar. Between the Russian departure in 1989 and ‘9/11’ Afghanistan was the ‘forgotten war’, with little international attention. The ambassadors did not have to report these meetings to their headquarters so there could be frank talking about options. There was no set agenda. The luncheon group was a way of engaging international opinion and building alliances where it might matter, without commitment. Otherwise he would be acting alone. “If you represent 192 countries”, he said of his UN role, “then in a way you represent none”.

Without the knowledge that ‘9/11’ would catapult Afghanistan to the top of international priorities only a year later, Vendrell spent most of his first year shuttling between the Northern Alliance and the Taliban. On the Taliban side he generally met their urbane de facto foreign minister Wakil Ahmad Muttawakil. But after several months of asking, he went to Kandahar to meet the reclusive leader of the movement, Mullah Omar, who encountered very few foreigners. Vendrell’s hopes were relatively modest. Initially he wanted an exchange of letters with both the Northern Alliance and the Taliban, agreeing to accept his good offices as a facilitator. They met in the dilapidated offices of the governor of
Omar arrived with no notice, dressed in a long Kandahari robe, and shook hands limply. He squeezed himself onto a sofa between Mut-tawakil and the head of the UN mission inside Afghanistan, a Pashto-speaking German, Thomas Ruttig, who had come as interpreter, while Vendrell sat on another sofa.

Omar had no charisma, and spoke in a low voice. He asked why the Taliban was hated by the outside world. Vendrell gave four reasons – the Taliban’s hosting of Osama bin Laden, the cultivation of opium poppies supplying 90% of global illegal trade, harsh Sharia punishments such as amputations, and the treatment of women. The list was in order of global priorities. Bin Laden had been reviled, particularly in the USA, since the attacks on the embassies in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam in 1998. “If he had been released the world would have lived with women’s violations”, Vendrell said. “What really mattered was OBL and terrorism. I did go in order of importance. Narcotics was very important too”.

While Omar did not say much of substance, and did not reply to the quartet of wrongdoings listed by Vendrell, shortly afterwards he did issue a fatwa to ban opium growing. Vendrell had offered support for alternative crops if he took this step, but he knew that there would be a gap between this promise and delivery. “The trouble was that it takes time for the UN bureaucracy to get going”. It would be several months before the promised aid arrived, and that emboldened hardliners spurred on by al Qaeda, who said that the international community cared more about old stones than starving people, and they destroyed the Buddhas at Bamiyan.

Back in New York after meeting Omar, Vendrell had a cold reception in the Security Council. Russia and the USA were both unhappy that he had better relations with the Taliban, who had made the mistake of recognising Chechnya, giving sanctuary and medical support to Chechen fighters. And on 12 October 2020, the attack on the USS Cole in Aden effectively froze conciliation with the Taliban, although it would take a while before there was a reaction; in the year before ‘9/11’ it was as if things were moving in slow motion. The attack came just before the US presidential election, and President Clinton’s counter-terrorism chief Richard Clarke failed to engage the administration in potential strikes on al Qaeda targets in Afghanistan. There was some diplomatic action. The UN adopted Resolution 1333 on 19 December 2000, imposing far stricter sanctions.

Neither Vendrell nor the UN’s Department of Political Affairs were
consulted, and Vendrell could quickly see that the tougher sanctions
would create problems for ‘good offices’.

As well as the two groups fighting in Afghanistan, Vendrell had now made
contact with three non-fighting groups, giving them coherence and inter-
national recognition. Making space for the non-fighting groups was essen-
tial to widen the scope of potential peace in Afghanistan. Vendrell said “I
always felt that we shouldn’t leave the destiny of Afghanistan to 80,000
fighters”. The most important of these groups was in Rome, centred on
the former king Zahir Shah, who had ruled from 1933 until ousted in a
coup in 1973. He had not been regarded as influential by Brahimi, who
ignored him. Vendrell knew that the king might play a pivotal role
once again in Afghanistan. There was even a pro-king group in the
Taliban. Once when meeting the Taliban he told them that he was on
his way to Rome to meet Zahir, and received the whispered message as
he left, “Give our best to Baba”.

There was another diaspora group in Bonn supportive of the king, but not
allied with the Rome group. And in Cyprus there was a group that was not
supportive of the king, led by the son-in-law of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar,
one of the leading commanders from the 1980s jihad. Iran supported
this group, and their involvement in Afghanistan led to an intriguing dip-
loomatic track.

As well as their continued membership of the six-plus-two process, which
continued at a formal level, meeting twice a year, issuing papers and having
no impact, Iran now participated in a Track II group of ex-diplomats and
generals from the four countries in the process that mattered most, the
USA, Iran, Russia and Pakistan, meeting in Berlin. Vendrell set this up as
a politically more agile and responsive process than six-plus-two. In Pakistan
he had specifically sought moderate generals he thought were not close to
the ISI’s embrace with the Taliban. And in December 2000 Vendrell set up
yet another international group, which would engage Iran with the USA in
direct talks for more than a year. This became known as the Geneva process
and was initially between Iran, the USA, Italy and Germany, the last two as
hosts of the Afghan non-fighting groups. Leaders of the Rome, Bonn and
Cyprus groups were part of the process, but never attended together. This
was Vendrell’s preference, indirect talks unlike the failed Tashkent deal.
Learning what the Afghan groups wanted rather than holding direct talks
between them would, he thought, deliver a better outcome. Many of
those attending what became known as the Geneva initiative would
become senior members of the post-Taliban government.
And there was a bigger diplomatic game at play. Iran had been looking for opportunities to talk to the USA, and this was it, less public and formal than the foreign-minister-level talks in Tashkent. “It was a much better place to chat up the Americans than the six-plus-two”, said Vendrell. The talks began as Afghanistan moved into the darkest year of the Taliban rule leading up to ‘9/11’. After the adoption of Resolution 1333 Vendrell fought to prevent the expulsion of the Taliban representative at the UN, Mullah Mujahid (who would be one of the Taliban negotiating team in Doha 20 years later). Mujahid did not occupy the Afghan seat, which was still held by the Northern Alliance, but he held diplomatic status.

The Taliban de facto foreign minister Muttawakil told Vendrell they could no longer accept the secretary general’s good offices, because the UN had taken a partisan approach and adopted sanctions only against the Taliban, but not against the Northern Alliance. And he also threatened to close the regional offices that the UN had established at the beginning of 2000 in five regional capitals in Afghanistan. Vendrell pleaded. “I tried to persuade them that, although there was one UN, there were three different bodies. (I thought of them as the Trinity, but of course, I didn’t tell them that.) And, I said, look, there are two inter-governmental organisations. One is the General Assembly, one is the Security Council. But the Secretary General is totally independent from them. Our approach, the Secretary General’s approach to you is not going to change is a result of this”. About ten days later, on his next trip Muttawakil told Vendrell that the Taliban could accept him as the mediator, but not as the UN representative. New York agreed to this, so for a while his role remained effectively the same.

At the beginning of March 2001, the secretary general Kofi Annan was visiting Islamabad, and Vendrell brought Muttawakil to see him. While he was on his way came the news that the Buddhas had been destroyed at Bamiyan. And although the meeting took place, that effectively closed any space Vendrell had to build creative solutions to resolve the conflict. Mujahid was expelled from the UN in June, at the insistence of the US Justice Department, and the five UN regional offices in Taliban-held territory were closed, leaving the UN with only Kabul and the office in Northern Alliance territory in Faizabad. Taliban rulings on stricter dress codes for men and women and the closure of offices five times a day for prayer became more rigorously enforced, and at one point they were planning that the very small Hindu and Sikh community should wear pink patches so they would not be bothered at prayer
time. Vendrell said “I implored them not to do that. So I was able to dis-
suade them from following the Nazis on that point”. Christian evangeli-
cals were arrested, the BBC office was closed down and the correspondent
expelled. Vendrell had always known there was a hardline pro-al Qaeda
group in the Taliban, and in 2001 they were in the ascendant.

The road to Bonn

On 9 September 2001 Vendrell was chairing a meeting of the Geneva
process. The Iranian ambassador disappeared from the room. “And after
about an hour, he came back looking bad, then signalled me from the
chair. So I went to see him and he told me that Ahmed Shah Massoud
had been killed. Well, first he said he had been injured. But then he
said to me, and didn’t say it others, that he had died.” The following
day most diplomats left, and by 11 September Vendrell was left with
just the Bonn group when an assistant came in to tell him the first plane
had hit the World Trade Center. He carried on with the meeting until
the news came that the second plane had hit, and like everyone else
involved in Afghanistan he knew immediately what this meant.

Vendrell wanted urgently to set up talks between the king and the Northern
Alliance. He knew there was no charismatic replacement for Massoud, and
that the Northern Alliance did not command nationwide support, but was
rooted in the Tajik northeast, and Uzbek northwest. He could see that there
needed to be a more broadly based legally constituted authority in Afghani-
stan that could occupy the seat at the UN, ready to take over from the
Taliban. And that this needed to happen before US bombing began.
“This interim authority would request the Security Council to dispatch a
multinational force to all urban areas vacated by the Taliban”. He considered
this essential to prevent the Northern Alliance from taking over by force.

But he was told nothing by New York except not to talk to the Taliban. For
more than two weeks there was no communication. “I have a feeling that
the Secretariat was frozen in fear because of the American reaction”. At the
beginning of October he was called with the unwelcome news that Brahimi
was returning in a more senior role as the Secretary General’s Special
Representative, while Vendrell would remain personal representative –
effectively Brahimi’s number two. Vendrell flew to Geneva to see him
and found him unrealistic about how fast things were moving. “He said
the Taliban would be in power until the spring”. Vendrell told him he
did not have that long. “The moment the bombing begins, they are
going to collapse”. Vendrell believes that Brahimi’s anti-colonial background in the Algerian liberation movement meant that “the idea that the Americans were going to get rid of the Taliban overnight did not appeal to him”. Brahimi did not take account of any of the initiatives that had happened since he had left the region in 1999. Vendrell found him uninterested in anything he had done. “It was a bit like Trump with Obama”.

They visited the Security Council together, where Vendrell thought Brahimi had no ideas, and then went to Islamabad and Iran, where Brahimi tried to set up meetings with the diaspora, or as Vendrell put it dismissively, “any Afghan who wanted to meet him”. He ignored the work Vendrell had done in forming coherent non-fighting groups, having no interest in the king. While in Tehran he asked Vendrell to summon Abdullah Abdullah, effectively the foreign minister of the Northern Alliance, who was based in Tajikistan. “Abdullah’s reaction was, if he wants to see me, he should come to Dushanbe. So I ended up going on his behalf. He didn’t go”. Brahimi then appointed the American Afghan expert Barney Rubin as an adviser, but he also appointed Ashraf Ghani, which Vendrell described as “bizarre, and certainly contrary to what the UN used to stand for, because normally when we do mediation we do not appoint anyone from that country”. The appointment led to the first joint letter from the Northern Alliance and the king: opposing Ghani was the only thing they could agree on.

Vendrell went back to New York with Brahimi in the second week of November, after what Vendrell called a “wasted month”. The USA and UK were becoming impatient. This was one of the rare times when the Secretary General had been asked by leading countries what he would recommend, but had little to work on as Brahimi had made no suggestions in his report. After some discussion the decision came to hold an international conference on Afghanistan. Brahimi’s first suggestions for a location for the meeting were Saudi Arabia and UAE – until Vendrell pointed out that they had been two of the three countries that had recognised the Taliban. Germany had been helpful in the Track II talks, and offered to host the conference. So they ended up meeting in the first week of December at Petersberg near Bonn – remote enough not to be directly accessible to the media. By then Kabul had fallen, and without an internationally approved interim authority ready to take over, or an international peacekeeping force ready to move in. Vendrell’s sense that they should have moved more quickly had been proved right.
Vendrell said that Brahimi refused to put a paragraph in the Security Council resolution ahead of the Bonn conference declaring that “military force would not be the basis for allocation of power”. But in the face of a vacuum once the Taliban collapsed, there was nothing to stop the Northern Alliance. America was very opposed to putting boots on the ground as the Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was pioneering a way of fighting wars that involved a very light footprint. Afghanistan was to be a short war. General Jack Keane, the Army Vice Chief of Staff, said “We are in and out of there in a hurry”. General Tommy Franks, commander at CENTCOM in Tampa, Florida, was obsessed by the Soviet experience in Afghanistan – more than 600,000 men, armoured divisions bogged down for a decade, before an ignominious departure costing 15,000 Soviet dead. “There’s nothing to be gained”, he told Rumsfeld, “by blundering around those mountains and gorges with armoured battalions chasing a lightly armed enemy.” Rumsfeld set the initial ceiling at 5,200 US troops. He was pioneering a new way of doing war: massive use of precision air power with special operators as the only boots on the ground.

When a small detachment of British Royal Marines landed at Bagram and headed to Kabul, Abdullah called Vendrell to ask what was going on. “The British have invaded”, he said – not a good optic after three British wars in Afghanistan in the past. Vendrell told the British that they should ask for permission, which was given. The commander of Northern Alliance forces who had succeeded Massoud on his death, Mashall Muhammad Qasim Fahim, promised that he would not enter Kabul when Taliban forces crumbled in front of incessant air attacks. But he inevitably ignored the promise, seizing military bases across the city. Wais Barmak, who later became Interior Minister, was the local head of the UN and effectively handed over the city to the Northern Alliance after the Taliban fled. He saw that Fahim’s troops knew exactly where to go – their occupation was clearly planned. What was not noticed by the small international presence at the time was that Fahim’s militias took large areas of land and property for themselves, including the large military training ground at Sherpur, which they designated prime building land in the centre of town, close to one of the most desirable residential areas, and parcelled into plots, which they quickly covered with giant garish houses. Their power-grab severely complicated the chances of Afghan reconstruction, and in particular weakened the potential for foreign-educated Afghans to play a role in post-Taliban Afghanistan.
The Bonn accord

The Northern Alliance takeover was a fait accompli, making the Bonn conference more complicated. Vendrell tried to keep the number of parties at Bonn down as he never saw it as a peace conference. He had always preferred indirect talks, rather than bringing all parties together. But Brahimi wanted to widen it to include the Cyprus group, as well as the Rome and Bonn groups. And he invited another group under Pir Gilani, who headed a prominent family in eastern Afghanistan, with hereditary status as religious leaders. It was Brahimi who coined a guiding phrase for the conference that Vendrell thought pointless, but would come to be repeated at every international event on Afghanistan for the next 20 years – that it should be “Afghan-owned and Afghan-led”. On the first day the disembodied voice of Hamid Karzai was piped into speakers on a satellite phone line from Kandahar, where he had bravely gone to rally forces against the Taliban. While the process might be Afghan-led and owned, the USA had the casting vote. Vendrell said “it was clear to everyone that the international community, or at least the US, were planning to have Karzai as the head”.

There were days of torturous negotiations, made more difficult as they happened at night after the Iftar meal, as the talks were held during Ramadan, and the delegates would sleep during much of the day. In the end Karzai was declared leader of an interim government. But the decision was made far more difficult than it might have been because Brahimi had failed to consult the king, who remained in Rome. Despite Vendrell’s attempts, preparations for the conference were flawed. There was a formula agreed that the king would be offered the post, and then decline it. But because nobody had told him what was planned, he then said that the delegates of the Rome group in Bonn should decide who should head the administration. The result was nine votes for Professor Abdul Satar Sirat, a former justice minister, and just two for Karzai.

Vendrell watched as Brahimi and the head of the US delegation, Jim Dobbins, rushed to the Northern Alliance leader in Bonn, Qanooni, who happened to be Sirat’s brother-in-law. There was an unwritten rule that the Afghan head of state had to be Pashtun, the largest grouping in the country. “They said ‘You must veto this choice. He is not a Pashtun’. Sirat was half-Tajik, half-Uzbek. And Qanooni said ‘Why should we veto him? We have no problem with Sirat being the head of the administration’.” Dobbins then went begging to the Cyprus group, who also said they had no problem with Sirat. They did secure a
promise to a veto from the family of Pir Gilani, but it was not clear if this had any status. Dobbins and Brahimi then went to Vendrell and asked him to call the king to get him to intervene against Sirat. Vendrell said he was upset and told them “Look, why don’t you do it? You didn’t want to consult the king in advance. You only want me to consult him because I am close to the king and none of you are”.

But he agreed to get a message to the king through the king’s closest adviser and son-in-law, General Abdul Wali. And after some discussion, a diplomatic fudge was agreed under which the king said that what he had meant was that they should choose a Pashtun among themselves. So they voted for Karzai, but Sirat refused to give up, and Vendrell had to spend the whole of one night persuading him to step aside.

Vendrell had two key disagreements with Brahimi during the conference – when to hold elections and the size of the future international presence in Afghanistan. Vendrell wanted to write a roadmap that had elections at the end of it, and had secured agreement for this from both the Northern Alliance and the Rome group. He kept putting it in the draft document for the conference, and every time it came back deleted, so he put it back in until Brahimi told him to stop. And Brahimi thought there should be a light footprint, while Vendrell wanted a heavy UN footprint, “not only a multinational force, but a UN role in governance, police”, similar to Cambodia in the early 1990s, but less than, for example, the full control of East Timor. Some of this difference was in their natures. Vendrell admitted he was a natural interventionist while Brahimi was anti-colonial. Brahimi knew that the American delegation opposed a substantial multinational force. The compromise was that the Bonn agreement supported what was to be called an International Security Force for Afghanistan, but the Pentagon watered this down to rename it the International Security Assistance Force, to avoid any suggestion that international troops would provide security themselves.7

Although many people since Bonn, including Brahimi, have said that the Taliban should have been at the conference, Vendrell does not agree. “This was never meant to be a peace conference. It was meant to be an emergency conference to work out a roadmap that would eventually lead to normalcy in Afghanistan.” At the time US forces were crushing the Taliban, and rejected any attempt to talk to them. On 5 December, the day Karzai once again appeared on his satellite phone at the Bonn conference, this time to accept his appointment as interim leader, a delegation of Taliban leaders came to see him in his makeshift camp not far from
Kandahar. They had been sent after a deal with a southern leader, Mullah Naqib, to negotiate surrender and the handover of the city. But when rumours of the potential deal reached Washington, Rumsfeld said his cooperation with the anti-Taliban opposition “would clearly take a turn south” if Taliban leaders were let off without facing justice. They would not be allowed to surrender. This strengthened the hand of the former warlord Gul Agha Sherzai, who heard the American message loud and clear and whose forces then pushed into Kandahar ahead of Karzai, weakening him as the internationally designated leader of the country.

And the Bonn settlement endorsed the claims of the Northern Alliance, who took all of the key ministries. Vendrell said that Brahimi did not have any illusions about them. “I don’t think that Lakhdar would have regarded the warlords as heroes, not at all. But I think his view was that they were there, and that one had to deal with the fact that they were there.” The agreement used unusually florid and sentimental terms for an international document to describe the Northern Alliance as representatives of brave Afghan mujahidin

who over the years have defended the independence, territorial integrity and national unity of the country and have played a major role in the struggle against terrorism and oppression, and whose sacrifice has now made them both heroes of jihad and champions of peace, stability and reconstruction of their beloved homeland, Afghanistan.

This was a one-sided interpretation of a vicious civil war. After the Soviet military withdrawal in 1989, it took the mujahidin three years to oust Najibullah, who had remained propped up by Soviet money. When they finally took Kabul in 1992, they signed the Peshawar Accord, which installed Burhanuddin Rabbani as interim president, after an initial two-month transition under another leader. The aim was a revolving presidency, with each of the mujahidin factions taking their turn. The Accord stated Rabbani would hand over power four months later. For clarity, the agreement read “The above mentioned period will not be extended even by a day”. Vicious fighting between the mujahidin factions that broke out soon after the agreement made any handover impossible, and destroyed much of Kabul. So Rabbani remained ‘president’ only because of the total collapse of the 1992 deal into a destructive civil war. He was reinstalled in the presidential palace when Kabul fell in November 2001, in the absence of any other interim authority or multinational force of the sort Vendrell had proposed two months previously.
Karzai arrived at the end of the first week of December, but was not formally president until 22 December. Rabbani was not idle in that time, appointing governors and police chiefs from his political allies across the country who were mostly Tajiks. Vendrell said it left Karzai in an exposed position when he came in to office “Basically all the provincial positions were jihadists from the north, some of course Uzbek and some Hazara, and very few Pashtuns.” Rabbani even attempted to remain as president, but was persuaded to leave by Iran, now playing a constructive role in Afghanistan. And this was when Vendrell’s practice of working with groups of interested nations paid dividends.

**Romeo and Juliet**

Until ‘9/11’ both the USA and Iran dealt with the Geneva process just at ambassador-level. But that changed when Iran sent more senior figures to the talks. The USA realised the potential opportunity of this track for dialogue, sending Ryan Crocker, then deputy assistant secretary in the State Department, later ambassador to both Iraq and Afghanistan. He was on the first flight to Geneva when US airspace opened after ‘9/11’. Vendrell codenamed the two sides Romeo and Juliet, and after a few meetings dispensed with the fiction that this was still a process engaging Germany and Italy with the Afghan non-fighting groups, so that the meetings became a vital conduit for the USA to talk to Iran. The message the American side was hearing from Iran was “get on with the war”. They wanted to move quickly as they thought the Taliban would take advantage of Massoud’s death and push to take the small part of Afghanistan then still out of their hands.

Vendrell remembers “They sat in a room in the *Palais des Nations*. And the Iranians would bring a large map of Afghanistan pointing out the places where the Americans should drop supplies, or bombs”. The maps were taken back to the USA to inform decision-making. As well as targeting opportunities they even discussed liaising between the Iranian Revolutionary Guard in northern Afghanistan and CIA operatives on the ground. Crocker said “We were up for it, it was just having direct CIA-Rev Guard liaison in the north to coordinate the fight”. Although the CIA supported the idea, fearing the Northern Alliance would otherwise play them off each other, it was a step too far for Tehran. Crocker realised Iran had more influence over the anti-Taliban opposition than the USA. “We never broke contact with the Northern Alliance, but we were very much a lesser player with them than the Iranians were. I
think the Iranians probably should be credited with doing a lot to keep the Northern Alliance steady.”

Vendrell thought Iran wanted to restore relations. “They saw this as an opportunity to show they were a civilised country, on the right side.” This came despite their past. When Crocker proposed that one session of the talks should be in New York, one of the Iranians said that he would not get a visa as he had been involved in the embassy takeover in Tehran in 1979. The Iranians who came to the talks told Crocker they called themselves revolutionaries, and still berated the USA for supporting the Shah, but were looking for a different kind of Iran. “What they had fought for had largely been betrayed by these rigid and narrow clerics”, said Crocker. Iran also played an important role in the Bonn conference, and the Geneva talks continued into 2002, ranging beyond Afghanistan onto Hezbollah and al Qaeda influence in Iran. But when the Iranian side suggested that they might move onto discussions on Iraq, Crocker had to back away. Even before Kabul fell in November 2001 America was planning the invasion of Iraq.10

Vendrell knew that Iran’s geographic position, located between the two countries that would be invaded by the USA after ‘9/11’, was an advantage to them. “I always said to the Iranians, you should build a statue to Bush. He got rid of the Taliban for you. He got the government in Afghanistan that is largely sympathetic to Iran, or at least was at that time. And he’s now got rid of Saddam, and has handed you a Shia government in Iraq”.

In late January 2002 Vendrell resigned from his post, since he had too many disagreements with the way Brahimi was managing things. He had established close relations with Iran and went to Tehran to say goodbye. And while he was there he witnessed their disbelief at being linked with Iraq and North Korea in President Bush’s Axis of Evil in the State of the Union address. Vendrell was actually having lunch with the deputy foreign minister Javad Zarief at the time news came of the speech. At first the Iranians could not take it in. “The reaction was, maybe we need to double check. Is that something they said, but that is not really meant?” To the part of the Iranian government with an outward-looking internationalist view, who had shared so much with the USA over Afghanistan, it felt like a betrayal. But once they had checked the translation it became clear, and to Vendrell “it was a totally lost opportunity”.
There was one other consequence of the Axis of Evil speech. Iran had kept Gulbuddin Hekmatyar under house arrest in Tehran for several years. He had been a prominent Pashtun guerrilla leader in the war against the Soviet occupation in the 1980s. Crocker had been trying to persuade them to hand him over to Karzai. But instead, in what Crocker believes was a direct response to the speech, he was released and regrouped his forces in Afghanistan, “to our bedevilment”.

**From loya jirga to constitution**

When he left the UN post, Vendrell had been approached to see if he would head a new EU mission. There was a German diplomat already installed, and at the beginning of July 2002 he replaced him, and would remain in the post for six years. His disagreements with Brahimi were not widely known outside the diplomatic community, so he was able to work with him, and set about trying to encourage EU members who were also in NATO to send more troops to ISAF. The uncertain birth of the force left it with an unclear mandate. Some, the UK, Denmark and the Netherlands, saw it as having enforcement capacity, with a more assertive peacemaking stance. Others, notably Germany, Italy, Spain, saw it as a peacekeeping force whose only military operations would be strictly for self-protection.

Vendrell saw it as a “major mistake” that the force was so small, just 5,000 troops at the start. And initially the force was confined to Kabul at American insistence, while American military operations under Operation Enduring Freedom continued their focus on chasing the remnants of al Qaeda and the Taliban leadership. The small ISAF force had little capacity to train new Afghan forces. This meant that for the emergency loya jirga in June 2002, the nascent Afghan army could field just one ceremonial detachment, ‘1 BANG’, the first Kandak of the Afghan national guard, wearing uniforms provided by Turkey, after intensive training for the event by British troops. Vendrell believed there was a decent process of election and fair selection for the loya jirga that did not include the former warlords. But they arrived anyway, pushing their way to the front, setting the tone for the post-Taliban settlement. There was no force available to stop them.

And the warlords decided the makeup of the constitutional commission, although Brahimi did succeed in appointing two international experts, the American Afghan analyst Barney Rubin and Yash Ghai, who wrote
the constitutions for Fiji and for Kenya. Vendrell said their advice was not heard as there was a desire for a centralised constitution. Vendrell said that this was supported by both the Tajiks and Pashtuns, “partly because they thought they would eventually run it”. In a multi-ethnic society though, this was not universally approved. “The ones who were in favour of decentralisation were of course the Hazaras and Uzbeks and the smaller ethnic groups. But they couldn’t prevail.”

If the constitution were to be centralised there were pressures for different international models for who should be head of state. The US envoy Zalmay Khalilzad preferred a presidential model, while Karzai had a French adviser urging more power for a parliament. And there was a question over the role of the king. Vendrell found himself alone in arguing against the idea that Afghanistan should be a republic. He wanted Zahir Shah to return to his throne for his lifetime. “And after that there will be a referendum as to whether to have a member of the royal family as head of state or a republic.” Karzai was very opposed to this, but it was not until right at the end of the constitution-making process that anyone asked the king what he wanted. He replied that he would prefer a constitutional monarchy. A compromise was reached under which Afghanistan would be a republic, while the king was proclaimed Baba-i Millat, ‘Father of the Nation’.

Another factor which Vendrell opposed was the insertion of ‘Islamic’ into the name of the country. The idea emerged from the floor of the loya jirga, and once raised it was hard to oppose. A Shia cleric, Ayatollah Mohseni, warned Karzai to abide strictly by sharia law and proposed for good measure that the transitional government be named the Islamic Transitional Government of Afghanistan. Khalilzad recalled “it was greeted with cries of Allahu Akbar!” Vendrell knew that it would be hard to object, but he also knew “many Afghans were sick and tired of Islamic State, Islamic Emirate, now Islamic Republic”. The decision was not a foregone conclusion. Gul Agha Sherzai, the warlord whose seizure of Kandahar had been endorsed when he was appointed governor, opposed the idea, arguing that under the Taliban Islam had been misused, so should not be part of government. And Iran’s delegates at the loya jirga were opposed, which was influential. But it was never put to a vote as the chair of the loya jirga declared the motion haram. The word ‘Islamic’ was inserted into the name of the country.

The first draft of the new constitution was cut-and-pasted from the 1964 constitution, as Vendrell observed, “with more Islamic elements put in”.

And it was not improved in the commission that followed, a consequence of the decision not to have more assertive international intervention.

Rubin and Yash Ghai had very little input. They failed. It was too late. They should have been sent earlier, I think. If it had not been for the light footprint, in my view, the Secretary General’s Special Envoy should have chosen the constitutional drafting committee in consultation, of course with Afghans, but ensuring that they would be moving towards a more secular system, and also a better constitution.

Disarming the warlords

The light footprint also had a significant impact on the continued presence of armed militias. Without significant international force to back it up, the process of Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration (DDR) was a failure. Any Weberian notion Vendrell might have had that the Karzai administration would have the monopoly of violence was quickly discarded. Japan had taken responsibility for DDR in the ‘raffle’ of tasks agreed in Geneva in April 2002. (Other tasks were USA: Army; Germany: Police; Italy: Justice; UK: counternarcotics). Vendrell said “My perception of serious DDR requires a weaponised military force basically telling those who have been disarmed, disarm or else. Clearly the Japanese were not going to do that”. There was no attempt to verify disarmament with biometric data, although this was available. The UN agencies had a database of more than a million Afghans they collected to verify returning refugees. But the warlords obstructed its use in the disarmament process. Before the Taliban fell, when Vendrell asked Massoud how many troops he had available, he answered 20,000. But his successor Fahim claimed 60,000 when it came to receiving incentives for disarmament.

Disarmament became a black farce when, absent an international force, the only organisation that could collect the weapons was the Afghan Ministry of Defence, where the minister was Fahim. “That was so idiotic”, said Vendrell. “I don’t think it was Japan’s idea. It was basically the US.” Fahim made no effort to pay soldiers from central funds: he and his allies were content to operate with militias who owed allegiance to them, they had no interest in building a competing national army. He kept his tanks lined up north of Bagram on the Shomali plain. In the looking-glass world created by the warlords, the first post-Taliban Afghan Defence Minister did not want the state to have effective security forces, as they would threaten his mujahidin militias. Most of the soldiers trained by
American soldiers in the first year immediately deserted, leaving the Afghan Army at around 2,000.

There were ongoing concerns that Fahim would mount a coup. Both Khalilzad and the commander of American forces in 2002–2003, General Dan McNeill, personally spoke to Fahim to warn him that they suspected his intentions. He was vice president, and would use the power vested in the office to make numerous appointments whenever Karzai was out of the country to firm up Northern Alliance power. Vendrell would say to Karzai “Do you sleep well, Mr. President?” And Karzai asked him why he raised the question. “Because Mr. Fahim would probably like your job very much.”

A new effort was made to rein in the warlords in 2004 with a process for the Disarmament of Illegal Armed Groups (DIAG) with similar poor results. The idea was to vet individuals, in meetings attended by representatives from the Afghan army, police, and the intelligence service the NDS. But all three of those organisations were compromised by their closeness to the very armed groups that were under discussion. Vendrell said that while the EU and UN were invested in the process, he found it hard to engage the Americans, saying to them, “You don’t seem to be particularly interested. You need to support Karzai in practice. You’re not winning, for as long as we have rampant corruption, terrible governance, no rule of law, no judicial reform, we’re going to get nowhere. And the streets full of militias with weapons”. He said the Americans took a passive stance “because they were the first to admit they had no plan for Afghanistan at all”. The desire in Washington not to get involved in the early years frustrated those sent by the USA to Afghanistan, notably Khalilzad, who wanted better treatment for the country of his birth. Rumsfeld liked to tell him that he should take his hand off the bicycle seat. Once, on a video-conference, Khalilzad exploded “Mr. Secretary, there is no bicycle!”

There were significant flows of donor money now flowing into the country, but without the institutional mechanisms to absorb it, and the warlords in influential positions, inevitably corruption became entrenched. This became a recruiting tool for the Taliban as they regrouped in the vacuum of proper authority as warlord militias again took a predatory toll on the countryside. In order to raise the profile of Afghanistan in Europe, Vendrell turned to his favourite mechanism, setting up another group of friends. He was concerned at the calibre of most diplomats in Kabul, and the desire of Western capitals to hear only good news about the war. He was sending frank reports that things
were not on track, but felt he was one of the few. The USA had turned its
focus away from Afghanistan towards Iraq, and as there was no actual
fighting it was hard to persuade other nations that there was a problem.
Tony Blair in particular only wanted to hear good news. In the UK it
would not be until Gordon Brown arrived in Downing Street in 2007
that diplomats were able to say that everything was not rosy. This was
helped as the ambassador who arrived then was Sir Sherard Cowper-
Coles, who was more willing to be frank than some of his predecessors.
Rather than try to persuade people in the region, Vendrell set up a
group in Brussels, which became known as the Vendrell group – compris-
ing the UK, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain. “And
then, of course, I spoke my mind. But only by 2006 did they buy into
what I’m saying, and they were willing to think of doing something
more.”

By 2006 NATO had taken over the whole country from US control, after a
decision had been made to shoulder the responsibility at the Lisbon summit
in 2004. This led to a new problem for international officials like Vendrell –
that nations now saw Afghanistan only through a military lens.

Typically, a foreign minister would come to Kabul, and would meet for an hour the
foreign minister, or even sometimes the president. And then they would meet their
own diplomats who would say things were going fine. Then they would meet the
troops or even only the heads of the troops and leave. Until 2006, I don’t think
anyone dared to stay overnight. In some cases, a prime minister would go to see
the troops without going through Kabul, which made Karzai rightly very upset.

So while concern increased, it was mostly for the welfare of international
troops. But through engagements like the Vendrell group the aperture was
beginning to widen.

Until Sarkozy came to office [May 2007], the French were not interested in Afgha-
nistan – “les affaires des Anglo-Saxons”. But somehow Sarkozy decided that he was
going to get more involved, and that’s why we had the Paris conference [in
2008] and then they sent more forces. And then he became the great supporter
of Karzai.

Vendrell left his post as head of the EU in Kabul in 2008, but saw the effect
of work in the Vendrell group in the London conference two years later,
where for the first time there were mutual commitments made by donors
and the Afghan government in a compact, which had been discussed in his
meetings. It was not ideal, because the Afghan government was allowed to
write the compact, so giving them the ability to ‘mark their own home-
work’, but in the world of good offices, things were never perfect.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

NOTES

1. Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror (Loc 4971)*. Simon & Schuster UK. Kindle edition.
2. http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/Afgh%20SRES1378.pdf (accessed 16 June 2022).
3. Dan McNeill interviewed for *A Different Kind of War*. Leavenworth CSI Press, 2008.
4. General Tommy Franks, *American Soldier*. Kindle, p. 324.
5. https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf (accessed 16 June 2022).
6. Author interview.
7. James F. Dobbins, *After the Taliban: Nation Building in Afghanistan*. Potomac Books, 2008, p. 105.
8. Pentagon press conference; 6 December 2001.
9. Ryan Crocker, *George W. Bush Oral Histories*. Miller Center, https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-oral-histories/ryan-crocker-oral-history (accessed 16 June 2022).
10. Franks, op. cit., p. 315.
11. Zalmay Khalilzad, *The Envoy*. St. Martin’s Publishing Group. Kindle edition.
12. Dobbins, op. cit., p. 139.
13. Khalilzad, op. cit.