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## Europe's Greece, America's Afghanistan

Each and every effort in the beleaguered nations will be wasted, unless their leaderships look past personal interests.

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Afghanistan and Greece are both heavily dependent on financial aid from foreign donors

Europeans are regularly skewered by many in the US for having "messed up" Greece. Meanwhile, the United States is doing no better with its own special ward, Afghanistan. There is plenty of blame to go around, but ultimately nowhere more than in the two troubled countries themselves.

The parallels between Greece (from a European perspective) and Afghanistan (from a US perspective) are astounding. Both have turned out to be very expensive engagements, taking up extraordinary amounts of decision-makers' time in Brussels and in Washington. Both have disproportionately dominated global news headlines for quite a long time.

And yet, for the extraordinary degree of European and US engagement, the growing expectation is that much of the effort will be for naught. The principal reason for this disappointing state of affairs is that Greece and Afghanistan have political leaderships focused mostly on serving their own personal interests. In both countries, there is widespread corruption and a general inclination among the elites to take foreigners for a ride.

No wonder then that, in both Europe and the United States, there are now profound questions about the viability of their ventures.

Greece adopted the euro on January 1, 2001, a mere nine months before the events of 9/11 put Afghanistan squarely in the US consciousness. European and US officials embarked on their respective endeavours of reshaping Greece and Afghanistan with high hopes. The general expectation was that their engagements would help remake what were notoriously troubled countries by modernising their economies, societies and politics.

And yet, for the hundreds of billions of euros the Europeans have put into the bailout of Greece (with at least a couple of hundred billion more to come), and for the trillion or so dollars the US has spent on the war in Afghanistan, the results so far are sobering. Both places are hardly in better shape today than they were a decade ago.

To be sure, European and US officials are culpable of having taken their eyes off the ball for key periods of time during their supposed intense engagements.

Unfortunately, once Greece had adopted the euro, the rest of Europe treated it in a manner reminiscent of how the US treated Afghanistan after the withdrawal of the Soviets in 1989. Its "engagement" was perfunctory at best. Left to its own devices, Greece's old wounds festered once again, only now with much more money flowing in.

## **Politics of corruption**

For the Americans, it was the costly and unnecessary involvement in the Iraq war that jeopardised, if not fatally undermined, their high hopes for remaking Afghanistan. That "sideshow" nixed what was already a slim chance of turning what is, at its core, a society largely based on clan and family networks into a nation-state of the classical definition.

Afghanistan's tribal conflicts simply run too deep to be "fixed". Its economy, insofar as it is not based on opium production, depends heavily on inflows of financial aid from the United States. Moreover, its broader neighbourhood provides little support for the United States' vague hopes of creating a "new Afghanistan".

Yet, when offered a helping hand for the reconstruction of their country, Afghanistan's leading politicians and cabinet ministers choose instead to take the whole arm. Their destructive practice of using high office, through family ties, for private gain, starts right at the top with President Hamid Karzai. But he and his clan are just one of many focused almost entirely on their own self-interest, rather than the nation's interest.

In Greece, it is not so much that the top politicians are corrupt. Rather, their vice is that they have proven incapable (or unwilling or both) to put an end to endemic corruption throughout society and to curb tax evasion by the rich.

The end results, however, are the same. Despite the inflow of billions - whether predominantly in financial aid (as in Afghanistan's case) or capital inflows (as in Greece's) - very little has been used by those in political power to remake their own countries.

As a consequence, Europeans and Americans now both resort to surrealist rhetoric. Europeans still claim that Greece won't default. After Defence Secretary Leon Panetta blurted out "we're winning" during his trip to Afghanistan last December, official US proclamations have tended to employ squishy statements like "making progress", "fulfilling commitments" and "achieving goals".

In both cases, a realistic, if highly sobering, assessment seems still quite a distance away.