

Afghanistan and the nightmare of infrastructure: The *New York Times*' Alissa Rubin and Jim Risen produced a [really good piece](#) this week on the absurd scale of problems besetting the construction of a 64-mile length of road between the Afghan cities of Khost and Gardez. The road is meant to undermine local insurgents, including the all-powerful Jalaluddin Haqqani. I traveled between the cities overland quite a long time ago (to visit with Haqqani's brother, [Siraj](#)), and can agree that a road would be useful. But the cost has skyrocketed, security has degenerated, and the road is still not finished. The *NYT* piece lays much of the blame on an alliance formed with a local strongman named Arafat, but the problems go deeper than that. There have been serious lapses of judgment in the selection of personnel all around. At the core, because Congress insists that war spending go to employ Americans, and not to ensure that the war is actually fought effectively, the U.S. Agency for International Development didn't hire a local construction company with intimate on-the-ground knowledge of the working terrain. Instead, it gave the contract to two American companies -- a New Jersey outfit named the Louis Berger Group and a Kansas company called Black & Veatch. Incredibly, they subcontracted the work to two Indian companies, BSC and C&C Construction. Let me repeat that -- to two companies from *India*, the blood enemy of neighboring Pakistan. Predictably, matters have gone downhill from there.

I emailed an American official in Afghanistan and asked why U.S. AID didn't subcontract to a Pakistani company -- Pakistan has excellent roads, and serious experience working in high altitudes (witness Hunza). There would be corruption, as is endemic in the region. Pakistan's intelligence agency, known by the acronym ISI, would burrow into the mix. But the road would be completed. Here is what the official told me by email:

Say that the U.S. does open this up for international bidding. The Afghans can't be competitive and, let's say that it does go to a Pakistani company. The Afghans will squeal that the damned Pakistanis are benefiting again at the expense of the Afghans. ... This Khost-Gardez road has been a nightmare for years. ... [But] I can assure you that any option you propose will have inherent in it the seeds of its failure in a place where there isn't legal recourse, and the Afghans know that we don't have the guts to enforce contracts the way that Afghans enforce their contracts.

[Josh Foust](#) thinks the problem is an obsession with roads. I'm not sure about that, but can say with certainty that there is a lack of focus on building them realistically. The Khost-Gardez story also is a parable about a [mindless fixation](#) on grandiose Afghan infrastructure that has seized certain powerful generals in the Pentagon, fed by the romantic showman professor Fred Starr of Johns Hopkins University.

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http://oilandglory.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/05/05/the_weekly_wrap_may_5_2011