

AFGHANISTAN'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE

202

FRAGMENTED REALITIES AND GEOPOLITICAL FAULT LINES

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- Afghanistan has failed to coalesce into a modern nation-state, but can better be characterized as a patchwork of contending ethnic factions and ever-shifting alliances contributing to a fragmented political and social reality.
- Political rifts within the government are rife. There has been a lot of speculation on whether the Ghani-Abdullah administration will survive or whether it will buckle under pressure from severe internal tensions.
- The security situation in Afghanistan remains extremely fluid and the insurgency shows no signs of abating. The Afghan Taliban control most of the anti-government battlespace, and fears of Daesh establishing a formidable presence in Afghanistan are unfounded.
- Afghanistan finds itself in the midst of a modern version of the historical Great Game, that is, by virtue of its geography becoming yet again a pawn in the struggles over political ideology, economic interests and commercial influence.
- After nearly two decades of conflict, the top Taliban political leadership have come to an understanding that neither side can win on the battlefield and that there needs to be a political settlement to end the violence. The weak administration would need guarantees that a ceasefire would hold and a subsequent inclusive peace deal would be struck in the event of the complete withdrawal of foreign military support.

Introduction

Geopolitics matters in the case of Afghanistan. Afghanistan's South Asian and Central Asian neighbours and Iran form geopolitical fault lines that inform the fragmented reality on the ground. Furthermore, the US, Russia and more recently China with their competing political, security and economic agendas in the region contribute to these geopolitical fault lines.

The internal Afghan reality in turn affects the neighbourhood, and essentially the internal and the external are integrally intertwined. Metaphorically speaking, Afghanistan is like a sock turned inside out, with the internal fabric catching hold of whatever material it comes into contact with. In other words, the various Afghan ethnic groups and political factions are in active contact with a variety of actors in the neighbouring Pakistan, Iran and, to a lesser extent, the Central Asian states. Assistance and patronage flow across the borders. Refuge and sanctuary are sought and provided depending on the ebb and flow of the ever-fluctuating local and regional political and security situations.

Despite the complexity Afghanistan entails, it is possible to outline the main contours of the fragmented reality and geopolitical fault lines that inform the situation on the ground. It is with this in mind that this Briefing Paper examines the current state of affairs in Afghanistan with a focus on the highly contentious politics, precarious security situation and the role of the difficult neighbourhood. The paper concludes with reflections regarding the prospects for peace, which do not appear promising.

Contending ethnic factions and ever-shifting alliances

Afghanistan is a vast country with a forbidding landscape of deserts and mountains. In between lofty mountain ranges are lush valleys, where communities lead a subsistence-oriented life. According to the World Bank, 73 per cent of the Afghan population live in rural areas. Many people live their entire lives in the vicinity of their homes and fields and seldom visit the provincial capital, let alone Kabul. Nonetheless, urbanization is on the rise with young people moving into cities searching for education and job opportunities.

A rough ethnic breakdown – about 40% of Afghans are Pashtun, 30% Tajiks, and the rest Hazaras, Turkmen, Uzbeks and others – masks baffling complexity. The intricate tapestry of tribes, subtribes, clans and social orders has remained the principal source of identification and allegiance among the people. Identities and group interests are highly local, and often associated with a political or regional unit – a village, clan or part of the country.¹ It appears as if Afghanistan has failed to coalesce into a modern nation-state, but can better be characterized as a patchwork of contending ethnic factions and ever-shifting alliances.

Although ethno-nationalism of the kind that has been witnessed in the Balkans has not been a major problem in Afghanistan's past, the fact that Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have been seen as supporting the Pashtun-dominated Taliban on the one hand and Iran, Russia, India and some Central Asian states the non-Pashtun Northern Alliance, an armed opposition group which fought the Taliban regime in the 1990s, on the other, has intensified ethnic rivalries.

Political rifts and uncertainties

The present government of national unity (NUG) is best seen as a coalition that rests on a Pashtun/Uzbek pillar of support around President Ashraf Ghani and a Tajik/Hazara pillar of support around Chief Executive Officer (CEO) Abdullah Abdullah. The NUG came into existence after extremely difficult and highly contested presidential elections in 2014. The position of CEO is a result of a compromise regarding the electoral impasse and essentially a kind of quasi-prime-ministerial post with more managerial than executive powers. Despite many shortcomings, the NUG can be considered an achievement of sorts, especially if the alternative was outright prolonged violence between the two contesting camps. The NUG is very much an elite political deal, although it can be seen as more inclusive than the previous administration of Hamid Karzai.

Nonetheless, two years after the formation of the NUG, the exact role of the CEO is still unclear. President Ghani is often accused of micro-management

1 See Abubakar Siddique (2012), *Afghanistan's Ethnic Divides*, CIDOB Policy Research Project.

and the over-centralisation of powers to the presidential palace, which leaves the CEO on the margins of decision-making processes. It is no surprise that the NUG is rife with arguments, disagreements, deep mistrust and mutual suspicion, not only between the president and the CEO but also between the supporting camps of the two leaders. The supporting camps fuel the incessant disagreements over appointments, management styles and reform agendas. There are fundamental disagreements on how the elections went, why the NUG came into being, and what it means for the balance of power and legitimacy of the partnership.

Since the NUG represents a fragile balance between many players and interests, it is hardly capable of delivering the various ambitious governance, economic and electoral reforms it has set for itself. To complicate matters further, besides the Taliban there are powerful former government officials and ministers who have a warlord background and who form a strong opposition to NUG and its reform agenda. This opposition bloc is at times referred to as the 'Jihadi Council'. The persisting political uncertainty continues to undermine private-sector confidence and affect economic activity in Afghanistan.

The international community present in Kabul, particularly the United Nations Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA), the US and the EU become extremely concerned every time a disagreement between the president and the CEO is brought into public arenas. The US, EU and UN envoys seek meetings with the two leaders and their supporting camps in an effort to defuse and save the situation from escalating beyond repair.

This state of affairs is indicative of the fact that the NUG is built on shaky ground and there is a real danger that if push comes to shove, the weak coalition government will tumble, leaving the international community with a dilemma over who would then be the legitimate interlocutor and representative to engage with.

Every so often, international conferences on Afghanistan are convened and the concerned international community comes together to assure itself and the fragile Afghan government that things are moving in the right direction. Prior to each conference, pledges of financial assistance from donors are scraped together in order for the Afghan

government to finance its recurrent expenditure and investment budget. Approximately 70 per cent of the national budget has been funded by international donors since 2001. Each conference round buys the government a couple more years of survival, but it does not help to instil donor confidence in the government when the political rifts between the incumbents in Kabul run so deep.

Extremely precarious security situation

Despite the massive input invested in stabilizing the country by the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and subsequent Resolute Support (RS) mission, the security situation in Afghanistan remains extremely fluid. The control of whole districts frequently changes hands between the government forces and the Taliban insurgents. The insurgency does not show any signs of abating. According to some estimates, approximately one-third of the country is in the hands of the government, one-third is controlled by the Taliban, while the remaining third is a contested no man's land.²

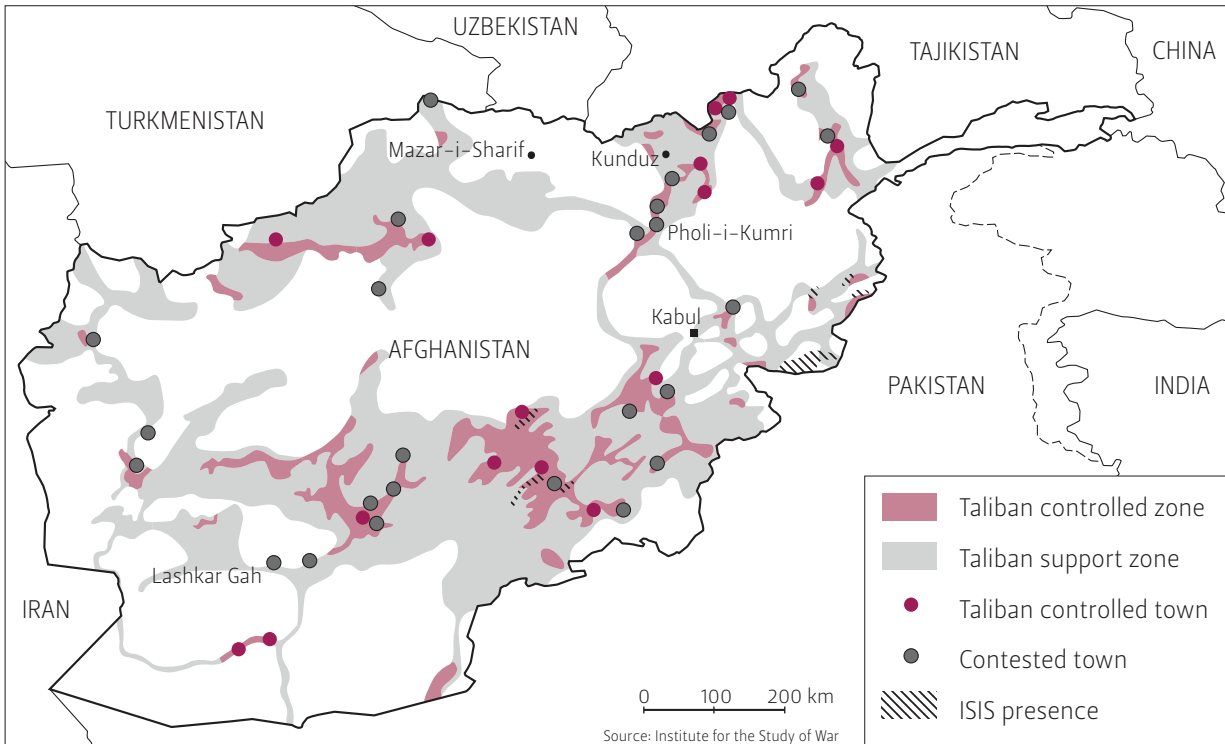
A high-ranking NATO official described the end of the 2015 fighting season between the government and the insurgents as a stalemate with both sides having 'bloody noses'.³ While this may sound like a balanced and fair assessment of the overall security situation from the perspective of the government, the characterization is anything but flattering. Any claims by the Afghan government that it is stemming the tide of insurgency flies in the face of truth. The situation on the ground depicts the government at the receiving end of blows. (See Map 1.)

The temporary loss of Kunduz to the Taliban last autumn was disastrous for the Afghan government. Kunduz is one of the major hubs in northern Afghanistan and the very fact that it fell to the insurgents was symbolically a tremendous blow to the government. Although Afghan security forces recaptured the city after heavy fighting, the damage to the credibility of the government as a security

2 This assessment is based on a number of discussions between the author and military and civilian officials in Kabul and Mazar-i-Sharif in November 2015 and June 2016.

3 Discussions between the author and a high-ranking NATO official in Kabul at Resolute Support HQ 30.11.2015.

Taliban presence in Afghanistan



Situation as of December 2015

Map 1: Taliban presence in Afghanistan.

provider was already done. With the onset of the 2016 fighting season, Lashgar Gah in the south was almost overrun by insurgents, forcing the UK and US to deploy special forces and advisors to an area from which they withdrew with much fanfare at the end of 2014 having ‘accomplished the mission’. As of late October 2016, the Taliban are on the verge of overrunning many other urban centres.

Northern Afghanistan, which was previously considered to be a relatively stable region, has seen government control shrink by a drastic 60 per cent within the space of two to three years. From a regional security policy perspective, it appears as if a decision has been made that only the triangle between the cities of Mazar-i-Sharif, Kunduz and Pholi-i-Kumri is worth defending. Incidentally, the only road between this strategic triangle and the capital, Kabul, is frequently cut off by ambushes. The provinces to the east, namely Takhar and Badakshan, and to the west, namely Faryab and Jowzan, appear to be written off as strategically unimportant. It is

worth noting that during the ISAF years these very provinces were patrolled by German and Norwegian troops. This begs the unsettling question: was it all in vain?

The situation in the north is symptomatic of the larger dynamics at play in Afghanistan. One by one, district capitals are either overrun by insurgents and/or the Afghan security forces abandon them by pulling back to ‘strategically more significant’ areas. It is worth noting that many of the so-called government-held areas amount to very little in the first place. In fact, at times, a lone police HQ or district governor’s office with a tattered flag fluttering in the wind behind barbed wire and a defensive perimeter has been denoted as government-held territory. The immediate vicinity of such compounds is controlled day and night by the insurgency.

While the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) may succeed in winning individual battles, they are unable to hold onto territory for prolonged

periods of time. There is also evidence of local deals struck by the insurgents and lone Afghan National Army (ANA) garrisons in Taliban-held territory that neither will attack the other. The Taliban are left to operate in broad daylight and govern the areas under their control, and they are ready to leave the garrisons in peace as long as the ANA do not venture outside their bases.⁴

The overall grip of the government will gradually erode to the point that most of the districts and even urban centres, with the exception of a few major cities and the capital, will remain outside government control. Within Kabul itself, a “Green Zone” has been established where the international community and key government institutions such as the presidential palace and the foreign ministry are hunkered down behind massive blast walls, checkpoints and barbed wire.

To complicate matters further, the current conflict is not only about the fight for territory and power between the Taliban insurgents and the Ghani-Abdullah government. In addition, local powerbrokers, warlords and narco-traffickers have stakes in the conflict. At times, it is a fight for control of local turf and communities, and at other times, a fight for control of lucrative resources such as opium and/or minerals, oil and gas or gemstones.⁵ Interestingly enough, at times, this state of affairs does not really matter to the local people as they do not really care who is in control as long as they are left in peace.⁶ It is the civilians who bear the brunt of the conflict. From the viewpoint of civilian protection, 2016 has

been tragic. UNAMA recorded 5,166 civilian casualties in the first half of the year and the rates are similar to 2015, which saw the highest total number of civilian casualties since 2009.⁷

The Taliban and Daesh

Rumours abound that Daesh – (the name is used in Afghanistan instead of ISIS) – has a presence in Afghanistan and that they pose a serious threat to the country by proclaiming the creation of a new province for the Caliphate, namely Khorasan. However, the alleged sightings are vague and difficult to verify. The small pockets of Daesh that appear to be present in Afghanistan can be found in the Nangahar, Kunar and Nuristan provinces in Eastern Afghanistan, but even there they control only certain districts, not entire provinces. Many of the members of Daesh are in fact disgruntled former Taliban or more likely members who broke away from the notoriously factional Pakistani militant group, Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

There is also the possibility that there is confusion over the sightings between Daesh and foreign fighters, particularly the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). Daesh also inspires the odd group of actors that proclaim allegiance to the Daesh leadership, but their numbers are too minuscule to make any significant difference to the overall security situation.

The Taliban certainly do not want Daesh to gain a foothold in Afghanistan and view their presence as a nuisance that distracts from the fight against the real enemy – namely, the ‘puppet’ government and its foreign supporters. In fact, in some instances such as in Kunar province, there has been evidence of fighting between the Taliban and Daesh. President Ghani has attempted to capitalize on the Daesh threat by offering Afghanistan as a regional hub against the group. The reasoning here is that the international community would then contribute more resources to the anti-terrorism

4 See *This is Taliban Country*, Fault Lines, Al Jazeera 9.7.2015, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/fault-lines/2014/04/taliban-country-20144108610575181.html>. Accessed 10.10.2016.

5 See, for example, *War in the treasury of the people: Afghanistan, Lapis lazuli and the battle for mineral wealth*, Global Witness Report June 5 2016, <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/afghanistan/war-treasury-people-afghanistan-lapis-lazuli-and-battle-mineral-wealth/>. Accessed 10.10.2016.

6 Comment made by UN official to author in Mazar-i-Sharif 1.6.2016; see also, for example, *Afghan forces flee as Taliban militants push into another city*, CBS/AP news, September 8 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/taliban-afghanistan-uruzgan-capital-tirin-kot-us-afghan-military-air-strikes/>. Accessed 10.10.2016.

7 *Protection of civilians in armed conflict*, Afghanistan Mid-year report 2016, UNAMA, Kabul, July 2016, http://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_midyear_report_2016_final_rev.1-9sept.pdf. Accessed 10.10.2016.

fight. Nevertheless, it is important to note that it is the Afghan Taliban that control more of the anti-government battlespace.⁸

Difficult neighbourhood

Afghanistan cannot be analyzed in isolation from the regional context. The neighbourhood is a problem-ridden one, marred by deep rivalries and mutual suspicions.⁹ President Ghani has promoted Afghanistan as a 'Roundabout' at the heart of Central/South Asia, where ideas, people and goods flow from east to west and north to south very much as they did in the days of the Silk Road. This is a fitting aspiration indeed. Unfortunately, at the moment it appears that Afghanistan is in danger of becoming a cul-de-sac where the complex political landscape is peppered with radical Islam and international terrorism.

The long-standing conflict between India and Pakistan is played out in Afghanistan, where both engage in outright proxy wars. On the bilateral front, Islamabad's actions, particularly by its military intelligence organ ISI, and its support for the Afghan Taliban movement, are not exactly conducive to enhancing peace in Afghanistan. Afghans cross the border at will and insurgents seek refuge and sanctuary on both sides thereof.

Central Asian nations' mutual relations are informed by competition and their role in stabilizing Afghanistan is half-hearted at best. While all Central Asian states are fearful of instability spreading from Afghanistan to the north, they have adopted a wait-and-see strategy. Although the border between Central Asia and Afghanistan is not as permeable as the one between Afghanistan and Pakistan, there is traffic in people and goods across the border.

Russia is concerned about the rise of political and religious extremism in the former southern Soviet republics, Tadjikistan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which Moscow considers its backyard. In

addition, Russia is a major destination for Afghan opiates and cannabis, which gives it a reason to closely monitor developments in northern Afghanistan. There is also considerable contact between local political power brokers and Russian officials in the region.

Iran's and Saudi Arabia's struggle for economic and political influence is also being played out in Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia wants to see a Sunni Islamic government in Kabul, and Iran is concerned about the fate of non-Pashtuns and Shia Hazaras in particular. Both seek to protect their investments, interests and, in the case of Iran, territory. Iran has invested in infrastructure projects with the aim of connecting northeastern Iran with Central Asia and China via Afghanistan. Saudi Arabia has invested a lot in building religious institutions to counter Iranian influence in the ideological realm. Iran is also very concerned over narcotics flowing from Afghanistan to Iran, and hence protecting the border is a keen national security interest for Tehran.

The United States has been an active player in Afghanistan since the 1960s. The support for the Afghan mujahedeen fighting the Red Army in the 1980s and the NATO-led operations since 2001 are the most well-known instances. However, the US Silk Road Initiative from 2011 outlines the US strategy for Afghanistan and Central Asia after the withdrawal of the majority of US and coalition forces from Afghanistan, with the regional emphasis on connecting and boosting all the land-locked economies of Central Asia regionally and globally.¹⁰

In addition, China has an interest in Afghanistan, particularly in its rich mineral resources on the one hand, and countering radicalism on the other. There are reports of Chinese contacts with the Taliban movement via the Pakistani military intelligence.

In many respects, Afghanistan finds itself in the midst of a modern version of the Great Game, that is, by virtue of its geography becoming yet again a pawn in the struggles over political ideology,

8 Thomas Ruttig, *Daesh and Taleban in Afghanistan*, Oxford Analytica Daily Brief, 17 November 2015.

9 See, for example, Kristian Berg Harpviken and Shahrbanou Tadbakhsh (2016), *A rock between hard places: Afghanistan as an arena of regional insecurity*, Hurst & Co, London.

10 Mika Aaltola and Juha Käpylä (2016), "U.S. and Chinese Silk Road Initiatives: Towards a Geopolitics of Flows in Central Asia and Beyond". In Helena Rytövuori-Apunen (ed.), *The Regional Security Puzzle Around Afghanistan*, Barbara Budrich Publishers, Opladen.

economic interests and commercial influence. The ‘old’ Great Game was an intense rivalry between the British and Russian Empires in Central Asia in the nineteenth century. The modern version is a similar competition for spheres of influence in Afghanistan by a plethora of players that are sometimes in alliance and in other instances in opposition to each other.

The competition and struggles between regional South Asian and Central Asian neighbours, Iran, Saudi Arabia, the US, Russia and China, will continue to inform their engagements with Afghanistan and influence the realities on the ground in Afghanistan, but the main geopolitical fault lines will remain in place.

Prospects for peace?

Given the situation on the ground, it is more or less clear that the Taliban have the upper hand and that the government is losing the fight, albeit not necessarily through dramatic incidents such as what happened in Kunduz, but rather through a gradual loss of grip on the overall situation. From an economic perspective, the Taliban are able to sustain their activities through involvement in the narcotics trade, extortion and racketeering, kidnapping, raising funds from private networks in the Persian Gulf and funding from foreign powers such as Pakistan. With such a situation on the ground, are there prospects for peace?

In one sense, it is relatively easy to answer the question. To put it bluntly, why would the Taliban negotiate with those whom they deem to be the losers? On the face of it, this question implies that there are no grounds for hoping that a peace deal would be brokered any time soon, much less that it would hold. The reality is much more complex. After nearly two decades of fighting, many members of the top leadership have come to the understanding that neither side can beat the other on the battlefield and that there needs to be a political settlement to end the violent conflict.

Many leadership members have been exposed to the wider Islamic world and are no longer viewing life

through the lens of rural Kandahar village life.¹¹ The Taliban leadership does not claim political monopoly over a prospective future state, nor is there a return to the days of the Islamic Emirate of the 1990s with its extreme interpretation of Sharia law, and the notorious stances on women’s rights, education and civil liberties.¹²

However, of more importance is the stance of the Taliban vis-à-vis the presence of foreign military forces, which they deem as “foreign occupation”. This is a non-negotiable issue. As long as there is a foreign military presence in any shape or form, the Taliban do not see prospects for real peace negotiations. This state of affairs does present a serious conundrum for the weak Ghani-Abdullah administration. If the foreign military support were withdrawn, would the government be in a position to negotiate from a position of adequate strength or would it buckle under the pressure? What guarantees would there be for a ceasefire to hold in the event of a complete withdrawal of foreign military support? There are no easy answers to these vexing questions.

Nor does the problem end here. If it was ‘just’ the government and the Taliban political leadership, perhaps some sort of deal could be struck. However, it is not entirely clear what the battle-hardened younger and radical Taliban military commanders would make of a peace deal. It should be recalled that a lot of blood has been spilled and, in true Afghan fashion, deaths need to be avenged. Furthermore, there are also serious internal power struggles between the military and political wings, and such a state of affairs does not bode well for any peace talks.¹³

Perhaps equally significant is the fact that there are a number of pro-government strongmen-cum-warlords who stand to lose out in any peace deal, and who would certainly complicate matters and very

11 Discussion between author and a top influential “ex-Taliban” thinker and member of the movement’s inner core of the 1990s in Kabul March 2015.

12 Osman, Borhan and Anand Gopal (2016), *Taliban views on a future state*, Center on International Cooperation, New York.

13 Giustozzi, Antonio (2016), “Appointment of military commander highlights Taliban’s internal power struggles”, OSINT Summary, *Jane’s Terrorism & Insurgency Monitor* 8.9.2016.

likely scuttle any deals before they could be implemented. Then again, Afghan politics is notorious for deal-making and, if provided with the right incentives, at least some of them might be convinced of the merits of a deal.

Looking at the big picture, it is unlikely that there will be any seismic shifts in Afghanistan's political landscape in the near future. In all probability, Afghanistan will witness further fragmentation in its political landscape with ever-shifting alliances between various actors vying for power. The Taliban are unlikely to join any political settlement as long as the Kabul government is propped up by foreign military presence and support.

There is a lot of weariness and frustration with the current situation in Afghanistan. However, so much blood and treasure have been spilled and spent by NATO-led ISAF allies and the Afghans themselves since the overthrow of the Taliban regime in 2001 that all those investments can easily be relegated to the annals of history. This means that the international community will need to keep on supporting the Afghan government for years to come. There is no end in sight to violent conflict. In the meantime, the Afghans will continue to struggle to survive in the harsh environment they call Afghanistan.

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