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Afghanistan

The precarious
struggle for stability

Highlights from an
Academic Outreach workshop

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This report is based on the views expressed during, and short papers contributed by speakers at, a workshop organised by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service as part of its academic outreach program. Offered as a means to support ongoing discussion, **the report does not constitute an analytical document, nor does it represent any formal position of the organisations involved.** The workshop was conducted under the Chatham House rule; therefore no attributions are made and the identity of speakers and participants is not disclosed.

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Afghanistan

The precarious struggle for stability

Highlights from an unclassified workshop of the
Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS)

21 January 2019, Ottawa

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The Workshop and its Objectives

On 21 January 2019, the Academic Outreach program of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) hosted a workshop to consider Afghanistan's fragile peace process and the prospects for stability in the country. Experts discussed the effectiveness of the negotiations, as well as the related domestic and regional impediments which challenge progress towards peace.

Held under the Chatham House rule, the workshop was designed around the work of six experts from Canada, Europe and the United States, and benefited from the insights of security practitioners representing a range of domestic and international experiences. The papers presented at the event form the basis of this report. **The entirety of this report reflects the views of those independent experts, not those of CSIS.**

The CSIS Academic Outreach program seeks to promote a dialogue between intelligence practitioners and leading specialists from a wide variety of disciplines working in universities, think-tanks, business and other research institutions. It may be that some of our interlocutors hold ideas or promote findings that conflict with the views and analysis of CSIS, and it is for this specific reason that there is value to engage in this kind of conversation.

Executive Summary

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In early 2018, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced that the government was willing to enter into comprehensive peace discussions with the Taliban. This offer was taken seriously by the Taliban which began sending consistent messages on its conditions for participation through multiple channels. Talks between Taliban representatives and the United States, facilitated by US peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad, continue to take place.

Negotiations are expected to proceed through three phases. First, talks must establish pre-conditions for substantive discussions. Second, there must be agreement on the structure and terms of a transitional government. Third, parties must agree on a comprehensive peace settlement which will include a new constitution and governance model. A significant milestone in the first phase was passed when an agreement in principle for a peace framework on 28 January 2019.

Important changes in the political and security environment are facilitating a serious movement to settle the prolonged violence in Afghanistan.

- Influential global and regional parties are prepared to consider seriously the Taliban's declarations that it is only interested in the governance of Afghanistan, and not international jihad. The US requires this assurance to agree to withdraw from Afghanistan, but it is also important for all of Afghanistan's neighbours. While regional actors benefit in some ways from Afghan instability, there are greater potential gains from an end to the war, and the suppression of Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K).
- Despite attacks by the IS-K, almost all the violence in Afghanistan is attributable to the Taliban, the government and US forces. The adherence by Taliban forces to a three-day ceasefire in June 2018 demonstrated that Taliban leaders exercised control of their combatants and could potentially enforce a peace agreement.

- Taliban conditions for continued talks, including a tentative date for US withdrawal, a transitional government, as well as an agreement for a constitutional process to produce a new government structure, are difficult. They nevertheless provide skilled diplomats with enough to work with. The US wishes to withdraw from Afghanistan, but the critical question is when and how it will manage this withdrawal.
- The Taliban remains confident it can eventually push out the US and defeat the government, but this would take more time and many more casualties. An end to the war in exchange for participation in government and possibly dominance is a reasonable bargain at this point.

The IS-K is focused on furthering international jihad and will not be part of peace discussions. The IS-K has fought the Taliban with the goal of replacing it. Its centralised hierarchy and dependence on electronic communications has made its fighters vulnerable to US attacks, and many IS-K leaders have been killed. An agreement not to launch attacks within Pakistan led to the provision of a safe haven for the IS-K leaders and a restoration of leadership stability.

- The IS-K is more extreme in its violence and beliefs than the Taliban and, consistent with the IS-K's harsh relations with local populations elsewhere, is well behind the Taliban in terms of local support. The IS-K morale and reputation have suffered from Daesh's defeat in Syria and the execution of reluctant fighters.
- The loss of the so-called caliphate in Syria initially led to more resources flowing to the IS-K, but this flow has now reversed as Daesh now attempts to rebuild in Syria as a guerilla force. Fighting strength has fallen from a possible high of 12,000 to an estimated 8,000. The IS-K has seen a decrease in its funding from Daesh and fears losing financial support coming from Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf.
- Supporters in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf still give limited support to the group. To retain their backing, the IS-K has

engaged in murderous attacks on Shia tribes and carried out attacks on foreigners in Kabul—possibly with the paid help of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar.

Pakistan, Iran, Russia, China and India have a greater interest in peace than in continued warfare in Afghanistan. As a jihadist force, the IS-K is a threat to their own internal security, while the Taliban claims to have no ambitions outside Afghanistan. Russia, Pakistan and Iran have relations with both the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan.

- Pakistan has been a long-term supporter of the Taliban in Afghanistan as a means of retaining regional influence, but has encouraged the Taliban to negotiate. India constantly warns of the continuing danger from Afghan extremists and wants a long-term US commitment to regional stability.
- Russia would like to see the US humiliated in Afghanistan, just as the USSR was, but it fears the spread of violent jihadist movements into the adjacent republics of Central Asia, and into Russia itself.
- China has a short common border with Afghanistan, but is sensitive to any movements which could encourage or train Uighur separatists.
- As a predominantly Shia state, Iran does not want a violent anti-Shia force, such as the IS-K, on its border.

Afghanistan's governance and electoral machinery contribute to national instability and could potentially produce outcomes that would conflict with an orderly peace process. Afghanistan's constitution established a strong presidency, and the difficulty of working with parliament has led to the assertion of even greater presidential powers.

- Provincial council elections have habitually been delayed beyond their constitutional limits, and have now been postponed to 28 September 2019, the date of the presidential election. This deadline may be impossible to meet.

- The results of the chaotic October 2018 parliamentary elections are still contested.
- There are well over twenty potential candidates for the next presidential election, representing numerous different factions. The election will take place at a critical time in the ongoing peace discussions.
- Afghans believe in the idea of democracy, but their reality has been corruption, vote manipulation and violence.

Many observers believe that conditions exist for progress in peace talks towards a transitional government. There is strong pessimism about whether this could lead to permanent peace.

- A transitional government would bring peace for between 18 and 24 months, but could not be sustained for longer. A transitional agreement would have to freeze the current status of Taliban and government control of territory, decide on the division of portfolios, and commit to a process for constitutional negotiations.
- A permanent peace would require agreement on many contentious questions: a permanent governance model; the structure of future unified security forces; human rights; action against extremists who are not part of the agreement; and measures to rebuild an economy destroyed by civil war, corruption and, increasingly, climate change.
- The ethnic, religious, tribal and political forces that have repeatedly led to civil war in Afghanistan are undiminished. The Bonn Agreement of 2001 empowered and enriched important factional leaders from past conflicts.
- The Taliban is strong and united, bolstered by senior leaders released from Guantanamo. The Kabul government is weak and unable to overcome endemic corruption, factionalism and economic failure.
- Afghanistan's army is undertrained, crippled by corrupt suppliers and no match for the Taliban without US support.

Much depends on how long US forces remain in Afghanistan. If the US reached a clearer agreement with the Taliban and then withdrew before a final agreement on a transitional government was concluded, the government of Afghanistan could collapse quickly. Withdrawal before a final constitutional agreement could be reached by a transitional government and would increase the already strong possibility that negotiations for a lasting peace agreement would fail. Even if a new constitution is agreed to, it could quickly evaporate if the Taliban felt there was no incentive to adhere to it. A final peace agreement would also be threatened by other violent or corrupt parties with too much to lose, or an unyielding opposition to Taliban participation in the government of Afghanistan.

- The Taliban is negotiating because it calculates that, although it will eventually take back total control of Afghanistan, the cost would be very high if it tried to do so early. As soon as the US withdraws, this calculation would change to a belief in the high probability of a rapid victory if fighting resumed.
- Many Afghans who can leave are doing so. Many believe that if the economy, stability and human rights did not improve after almost eighteen years of foreign attention, there is little hope for Afghanistan after abandonment by the US and its allies.
- An early withdrawal of US forces could result in a new Taliban offensive and the end of the current regime.

CHAPTER 1

What the Taliban Want in a Peace Deal

A peace initiative in early 2018 by President Ashraf Ghani led to a positive response from the Taliban, and a brief but observed ceasefire. Peace talks in Qatar between the Taliban and the United States were renewed. Multiple, coordinated signals from the Taliban on a negotiating agenda made them appear sufficiently flexible to encourage a belief in Kabul that a settlement was feasible. A final settlement could take many years to achieve, but investing in the process is justified by events to date.

This chapter presents core elements of the Taliban's vision as to how a peace process should unfold. These are derived from scores of interviews conducted in 2018 with people close to, or in touch with, core members of the group. A remarkably consistent Taliban vision emerges from those conversations, suggesting the group may be releasing a trial balloon of sorts. Though Kabul or Washington would be unlikely to embrace the Taliban's exact proposal as detailed below, it is nevertheless much more pragmatic than Taliban demands of the past, and closer to what skilled negotiators could eventually sculpt into a viable political settlement.

Important changes in 2018

The year 2018 brought unusually positive momentum in the years-long effort to end the war in Afghanistan through a political settlement. In January 2018, prospects for peace seemed as dim as they had ever been: the Taliban then launched some of their most devastating attacks ever in Kabul, prompting statements from the Afghan and US presidents that peace with the group was nearly off the table. The very next month, however, President Ghani used the second Kabul Process conference to make probably the most forward-leaning public peace offer in his government's history, including the tabling of a

constitutional review process and the full acceptance of the Taliban as a political party.

This offer set off a chain of events that collectively gave the Afghan peace process—nascent though it remains—considerable momentum. In March, pro-peace sit-ins, marches and demonstrations broke out across Afghanistan. In subsequent months, a series of conferences rallied support for peace among Afghanistan's neighbours, the donor community and Islamic scholars. In June, the warring parties observed a nationwide ceasefire, for the first time in 40 years, over three jubilant days. In July, media reports emerged that the Taliban and US had restarted direct talks in Qatar. In September, the Trump Administration signalled seriousness by appointing the dynamic and respected Zalmay Khalilzad to lead them. The Taliban in turn elevated their own negotiating team, with press reports indicating that senior figures based in Pakistan (senior *shura* member Amir Khan Mottaki) and Qatar (former Guantanamo detainees Muhammad Fazl and Khairullah Khairkhwa) joined recent meetings.

One effect of this cascade of events has been a commensurately elevated discussion in Kabul and across Afghanistan about what the content of a political settlement actually should be. Where once the discourse around this issue limited itself to preliminary issues like whether to recognise a formal Taliban office in Qatar, a visitor to Kabul now encounters deeply substantive conversations across the Afghan political elite on the core components of a potential deal: the form and make-up of a post-settlement government, potential revisions to the constitution, mechanisms for reabsorbing Taliban fighters, and—perhaps most controversially—how to address the presence of foreign troops.

The great unknown remains what the Taliban think about these questions and, indeed, whether the insurgency is actually open to making peace. The group has sent mixed signals over the last year. It agreed to the June ceasefire (likely failing to anticipate the depth of pro-peace sentiment the ceasefire would reveal within its own ranks), and its own public statements suggest the group is taking the dialogue with the US seriously. On the other hand, the Taliban

continue their years-long refusal to negotiate with what they call the illegitimate Afghan government, did not formally accept a second proposed ceasefire for the Eid al-Adha holiday in August 2018, and have maintained an intense military campaign in nearly every corner of Afghanistan. What, then, do the Taliban ultimately want?

In the last months of 2018, the author conducted scores of interviews in Afghanistan with people close to the Taliban, influential former members of the group, and prominent non-Taliban Afghans and foreigners who have established their own informal channels of communication with the group. These channels have multiplied over the last year, and provide substantial insight on the Taliban's potential positions, priorities and internal debates. One should be careful not to overstate the reliability of such insights. There could be a vast gulf between a view expressed in a private conversation today and an official negotiating position someday in the future. Some themes, however, emerge consistently across these conversations, tracing back to different parts of the Taliban hierarchy, and suggest the group has an increasingly coherent and consistent view of how a peace agreement should proceed.

What the Taliban want

Since the fall of their regime in 2001, the Taliban have consistently proclaimed two fundamental objectives: they want foreign troops out of Afghanistan and an Islamist government restored to power. For years, they rigidly held to these demands. But more recently, the Taliban's agenda has evolved such that compromise is now conceivable.

The Taliban have been consistent in their demand that all foreign troops leave Afghanistan before serious political talks can take place. This demand has progressively softened, first to a demand that intra-Afghan negotiations begin only after the US issues a timetable for its troops to withdraw, and more recently for the US to simply state an end date to its military presence. Taliban members also subtly note other points of potential flexibility, for example, that the US could more or less unilaterally choose that date, that it could be conditional

(for example on the successful conclusion of an Afghan political settlement), and that a future legitimate Afghan government could ask a US troop contingent to stay in Afghanistan after all.

Taliban interlocutors explain the shift in their thinking by pointing out that Afghanistan could become another Syria if foreign troops leave too quickly. What does not appear to be negotiable, however, is the Taliban's insistence that understanding on US withdrawal come *first* in the process. They evince little openness to discussing internal political issues before related assurances are in hand, and it would be a mistake to interpret the modest flexibility in their position as a sign that they ultimately want foreign troops to stay.

Taliban interlocutors describe a mostly consistent sequence of events that the US announcement of an end date should set in motion. It would inaugurate immediate talks with the Afghan government (and probably other Afghan factions) on the composition of a transitional government. Interlocutors often told the authors that the Taliban do not necessarily object to many of the provisions of the post-2001 Afghan constitution—even, for instance, holding regular elections and protecting most, if not all, of the rights the constitution gave women. The group will never agree to simply join the system it has for so long decried as illegitimate, however, in part because it would devastate the argument they have made to a generation of fighters that their war is religiously legitimate because the Western-backed government is not. This is the rationale for a transitional government; in effect, the Taliban can afford only to join a new, if similar, government, perhaps under a new, if similar, constitution.

Most interlocutors described a transitional government of set duration, perhaps two years, and a predetermined list of objectives. This would include: a) overseeing a constitutional review process, which would resemble but not precisely follow that laid out in the current constitution; b) conducting a comprehensive reform of the Afghan security services, with an eye towards depoliticising them and allowing Taliban cadres to join; c) mapping out the areas that the government and Taliban respectively control, pending a more permanent settlement in which a single national force takes over;

d) providing for former Taliban fighters and prisoners, while also collecting their weapons; e) facilitating the return of refugees, an issue foreigners often omit when listing the core elements of a settlement but which the Taliban tend to include; and f) electing a more permanent government at the end of the transitional period.

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The last point is especially crucial. Rarely if ever does one find Taliban interlocutors still calling for a settlement that restores an emirate form of government. Taliban figures are increasingly willing to state that they can accept some form of elected republic—often noting, paradoxically, that the main problem with elections now is the corrupt and chaotic way in which the Afghan government has administered them. The main issues for debate concern the nature of that republic: whether it meets their standard for sharia compliance, how centralised it is (the Taliban unfailingly argue for a tightly centralised system), and whether it can credibly be portrayed as a break from what they consider the Western-dominated Bonn regime.

If the Taliban comes forward with a version of this plan, Kabul and Washington are unlikely to accept it without modification. Washington will be reluctant to commit to troop withdrawals at the outset of a process, and any Afghan president will hesitate to simply cede power to a transitional government. The sequence above fails to address immensely complex and thorny questions associated with each issue it touches. To name just a few: how Afghanistan's many factions and political groups will divide power under a transitional government; what conservative religious reforms the Taliban will demand; who controls areas that are currently hotly contested; and (most importantly for many Westerners) how to deal with international terrorist groups. Nonetheless, one cannot help but notice that the sequence the Taliban is floating provides more than enough of the basic materials for skilled diplomats in Kabul and Washington to begin outlining a lasting political settlement. If leaders in those capitals

were themselves to map Afghanistan's political transition, they might begin with many of the same elements.

Are the Taliban sincere?

The Taliban are genuinely interested in peace, but far from desperate for it. In the meantime, the group remains committed to its military campaign. This position reflects battlefield confidence. Taliban leaders judge that the group can withstand US military pressure and, if the United States eventually leaves, win the war. If this scenario eventually plays out, all bets are off regarding the scenario described above. With full military victory, the Taliban's first instinct might well be to restore an emirate. Most Taliban leaders recognise, however, that such a scenario is unlikely to unfold anytime soon. Even the current, much-reduced US presence is enough to keep the group from winning. To take power after a US withdrawal would be bloody and arduous, if it happens at all. For these and other reasons, Taliban leaders are willing to contemplate peaceful alternatives.

Sceptics will point out that the Taliban have had the opportunity to negotiate for peace since at least 2010, when they sent representatives to Qatar to conduct talks with diplomats from the US. Many argue that the group has used this platform only to stall and seek concessions from Washington. In practice, the channel has moved slowly and sometimes painfully so. But Taliban negotiators are not solely responsible for the impasse. Both the Afghan and the US governments have often been internally divided over whether and how to pursue peace with the Taliban, with the result that both have been hesitant to put an offer on the table that meaningfully addresses the Taliban's two fundamental objectives.

Those who doubt the Taliban's readiness for peace will point to the sheer volume of Taliban violence. The bloody assaults in 2018 of Ghazni and Farah attest to this; more Afghan cities will come under similar threat in 2019, and smaller attacks will continue every day across the country. The intensity of military effort, however, does not have as much bearing on the Taliban's interest in peace as it does for the other parties involved in the conflict. Other than during the

June 2018 ceasefire, none of the parties—the US, the Afghan government and the Taliban—have pulled their punches on the battlefield, even when they sincerely desired talks.

The tragedy is that a bloody military stalemate has prevailed for years in Afghanistan. Each of the main belligerents is interested in a peaceful alternative but doubts that the others are, and fears what it could lose in negotiations. The major military decisions that each party makes are fraught with hesitation and disappointment: overrunning cities only to lose them immediately, clearing remote areas that prove impossible to hold, sending enough troops to escalate but not win at significant human costs while holding out little hope of breaking the stalemate.

A comprehensive peace agreement remains years in the future, if it ever materialises, but in 2019 there is more reason than ever to invest in its prospects. The omnipresence of peace discussions in Kabul and the overwhelming popularity of the June 2018 ceasefire suggest that serious intra-Afghan negotiations could gather momentum quickly. The big ideas that could define a successful peace deal, one which the Taliban could genuinely embrace, are already circulating among the main Afghan players. The next steps are to get them formally on the negotiating table, and begin making them manifest.

CHAPTER 2

The Islamic State-Khorasan: Capacities and Future Prospects

Emerging in 2015, the highly centralised and motivated Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K) forces inflicted significant defeats on the Taliban, which they hoped to supplant. Their success receded in 2017-2018 as US forces decimated the leadership, funding and fighters became scarcer, and Taliban fighters were increasingly effective against them. Defeat in Syria undermined IS-K's reputation and morale. Its fighters are still able to attack soft targets, particularly Shia tribes and Kabul civilians, but are dependent on a sanctuary agreement with Pakistan for their resilience.

The Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)¹ rose to the chronicles quite meteorically in 2015 and enjoyed a media and political impact that seemed out of all proportion to its actual numerical strength. It is a fact, however, that the IS-K has humiliated repeatedly the much larger Taliban on the battlefield. The Taliban were only able to inflict a serious defeat on the IS-K once in Zabul, the period 2015-2016, but even there the IS-K was soon back, expelling the Taliban from some of its old strongholds in the northern districts of that province. Indeed IS-K's military organisation was optimised to fight the Taliban: highly centralised, it allowed the group to concentrate its better trained and more motivated (but smaller) forces wherever they were needed much faster than the Taliban could do.

The US and Afghan authorities were never primary targets of IS-K, despite certain indications to the contrary. When in late 2015 the group established a foothold in Achin district, unleashing a chain of events that brought US forces in direct and permanent confrontation with the group in the eastern areas of Nangarhar province, the IS-K essentially messaged increasingly sceptical donors that it was fighting a jihad against the 'crusaders', not a civil war with other jihadists. As the IS-K started carrying out terrorist attacks in Kabul in 2016, its targets were mostly unprotected Shia civilians, thus allowing the

group to highlight to its donors in the Arab Gulf that it was hitting hard at targets linked to Iran. It is particularly important to note that, despite taking on the US and Afghan authorities, the IS-K never re-organised, and maintained a centralised structure despite persistent US targeting, which killed many of its leaders from 2015 on. This seems to suggest that the IS-K considered its centralised structure an essential asset, which only makes sense if the primary enemy were the Taliban.

Whatever IS-K's original plans, many developments have taken place mostly beyond Khorasan in 2017 and 2018 that dramatically changed its operating environment and the wider context. This chapter reviews these developments.

The consequences of events in Syria and Iraq

The most important development that occurred in 2017-2018 was the gradual collapse of Daesh's so-called caliphate in Iraq and Syria. The consequences of this collapse for Daesh have been multi-fold, but some stand out:

- The myth of military invincibility was undermined;
- Funding was disrupted;
- The ranking of Khorasan province within the Daesh global movement changed;
- The flow of people switched from Khorasan-Middle East to Middle East-Khorasan;
- The ability of Daesh's leadership to exercise control and influence was reduced.

Although initially in denial, by the summer of 2018 the IS-K sources admitted that the morale of the organisation was suffering because of the collapse of the caliphate in the Middle East. In the short term, however, the IS-K actually benefited financially from the crisis, as a significant portion of the cash accumulated in Syria and Iraq was transferred to Khorasan during the first half of 2018. This allowed

the IS-K temporarily to make up for dwindling donations from the Gulf. It was only during the summer of 2018, as the cash transfers dried up, that the full consequences of the collapse became evident. The impact was made all the more painful by the fact that even direct donations to the IS-K from the Gulf were then curtailed, as donors increasingly questioned the viability of the Daesh project.

The decline in external funding gave a sense of urgency to the group's efforts to raise revenue locally. In particular, the IS-K started taxing all its subjects and re-oriented its strategy in order to seize control of as many mining operations as possible. Interestingly, as of autumn 2018, the IS-K had not lifted the ban on the opium trade, thereby depriving itself of a major source of revenue. This is reportedly due to a direct order of Al-Baghdadi; perhaps the supreme leader is wary of the indiscipline that getting involved with the narcotics trade would engender (as is the case of the Taliban).

After the collapse of the caliphate in the Middle East, Khorasan emerged alongside Libya as one of the two 'provinces' that the group's leadership had selected as the most promising, and deserving of most of the resources still available. These two provinces were also chosen as the ones where the surviving leaders would relocate gradually as the last Daesh hide-outs in Syria were being wiped out. By 2018 the flow of Daesh members from Khorasan to Iraq and Syria had of course all but dried out, and instead Afghans, Pakistanis, Central Asians and small numbers of other nationals tried to reach Khorasan through complicated routes, like that running through Turkey, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan. The flow allowed by such smuggling routes was modest though, rarely exceeding 100 fighters a month.

While Daesh's top leadership had always struggled to control the IS-K, its influence and control over it reached its lowest point during the final phase of its losing battle for the cities of Iraq and Syria. Between May 2017 and March 2018 the struggles within the IS-K worsened and the group split into two hostile factions: a majority faction composed of Pashtuns (Pakistanis and Afghans) concentrated along the Pakistani border, and a minority faction composed mainly

of Central Asians, Baluchis, Afghan Tajiks and Uzbeks located on the Central Asian border. Only in March 2018, after being expelled from all of Iraqi and Syrian cities did Daesh intervene decisively in the power struggle and impose a settlement upon the IS-K. At this stage, Daesh considered sending quite a few of its leaders to Afghanistan, where it needed a fully functional and stable organisation.

The impact of the conflict with the Taliban

The Taliban and the IS-K have been fighting almost without interruption since the IS-K started encroaching on Taliban territory in the spring of 2015. Initially, the Taliban was unprepared to fight this enemy, and the bulk of its elite units was concentrated around a few government cities in an effort to take them. Throughout the period 2015-2018, most of the fighting between the two was concentrated in Nangarhar province, where the two sides gained and lost ground repeatedly. On the whole, however, the position of the Taliban in Nangarhar was greatly weakened by relentless IS-K assaults. The Taliban's positions were also significantly weakened in neighbouring Kunar province. The situation was such that, in the autumn of 2017, Taliban leader Haibatullah, always hostile to the IS-K, agreed to negotiate a ceasefire with the group; but the truce collapsed after just three weeks. It took years and sustained Iranian and Russian support for the Taliban of the Quetta Shura to obtain their first strategic victory against the IS-K. This occurred in August 2018, when the Taliban seized the IS-K base of Derzab, located in northwestern Afghanistan, just as the full impact of the defeat of the caliphate in Syria and Iraq was beginning to be felt.

Although the conflict with the Taliban was starting to take a toll on the IS-K by the summer of 2018, the latter was still well positioned by the autumn in eastern Afghanistan, where its potential for a complete take-over of Nangarhar and Kunar provinces could no longer be dismissed. However, the IS-K remains vulnerable because of its ongoing poor tribal relations (much poorer than the Taliban's), and its shrinking finances, a problem that the IS-K did not face until the middle of 2018. The group has shown it can do well enough

without tribal support, but only as long as it has abundant financial resources.

The IS-K sources claimed that their numbers were rising fast in 2015 and 2016, which is probable given the expansion of their area of operations. In 2017 and early 2018, however, membership appears to stagnate at around 10-12,000 in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while by the summer of 2018, sources of the group were putting the number as low as 8,000. Although the definition of ‘members’ might vary, affecting the comparability of data, sources have admitted that a decline did take place, due in part to recruitment difficulties. Having attracted quickly many of the Taliban and Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan’s² (TTP) hardliners, the IS-K nearly exhausted the most obvious recruitment pool. Furthermore, the collapse of the caliphate did not exactly provide a strong incentive for prospective recruits to join.

It should also be pointed out that remaining Taliban groups harbouring jihadist sympathies are pragmatic, preferring to enter into alliances with the IS-K, rather than join the organisation. This is true of the Haqqani Network, which in December 2017 reached an agreement with the IS-K to collaborate in Kabul and in some provinces, and of several smaller Taliban networks in Kunar as well. Some sources within the Taliban allege that the IS-K pays cash to the Haqqani Network for its support, including help in organising terrorist attacks in Kabul.

External relations

As of the end of 2018, the IS-K was still far from having achieved financial self-sufficiency. According to sources within the organisation, it has remained dependent on continued donations, mainly from the Gulf, and from Saudi Arabia in particular. Saudi institutional donors are the ones that mostly push the IS-K to advertise its violent targeting of ‘Iranian interests’, primarily in Kabul. The private Gulf donors, on the other hand, push the IS-K to demonstrate genuine jihadist credentials by fighting the US where it can.

The IS-K's military council signalled a major shift in its geopolitical positioning when it selected Aslam Faruqi (nom de guerre) as its governor in May 2017. Faruqi was an advocate of appeasement with Pakistan, in exchange for being granted a safe haven by the Pakistani authorities. Since then, Faruqi has spent most of his time inside Pakistan, as have most of the other senior figures in the organisation. According to IS-K sources, Pakistani intelligence have even started providing some financial support to the organisation. Faruqi's selection as governor was controversial: it was not acknowledged by Daesh leadership until March 2018 and coincided with the break-away of a minority faction led by Uzbek commander Moawiya that only re-joined the fold in early 2018.

Undoubtedly, the relationship with the Pakistani authorities has allowed the IS-K to become more resilient. For example, the decapitation of its top leaders by US drones and planes has slowed down greatly. However, the relationship has not been idyllic, because of internal IS-K opposition from the Moawiya group, as well as divisions within the Pakistan security establishment over whether the IS-K should be provided a safe haven. Since May 2017, the IS-K has carried out only occasional attacks in Pakistan, usually against non-state targets, and there have been a few small waves of repression by security agencies against the IS-K as well. This suggests that either both sides constantly are trying to renegotiate the terms of the agreement or that its implementation is a matter of dispute. Still, the IS-K has been able to move its main base from Afghan territory, where it was vulnerable to US air strikes, to the Tirah Valley in the tribal areas of Pakistan. It is also able to maintain several training camps in various locations throughout the tribal areas.

*...the relationship with the Pakistani authorities
has allowed the IS-K to become more resilient.*

The understanding reached with Pakistan means that the IS-K is only really militarily active in Afghanistan. It is not responsible for the small operations conducted in Central Asia despite the IS-K's claims to the contrary, or for operations carried out in Iran.

Prospects

The IS-K sources insist that the group does not intend to give up any of the main bases it set up in Afghanistan from 2015 onward. However, in light of the geographic spread between Nangarhar, Kunar, Badakhshan, Zabul and Jowzjan, it seems increasingly unlikely that the IS-K can maintain control over them in the face of stiffening opposition from the Taliban. Some consolidation is in order for the IS-K to get through these difficult times, until revenues and the number of its recruits increase.

In the late summer of 2018, Daesh decided that Syria would remain its main base of operations, and that it would continue its complex transition towards becoming a guerrilla force. More funds will be devoted to the Syrian theatre than Daesh had been planning to allocate as recently as the spring of 2018, leaving fewer resources available for its Libyan and Khorasan provinces.

In this changing environment, the IS-K cannot afford to let its activities sink below a certain level, lest its remaining donors decide the group has nothing to offer. The growing US pressure on Iran might reduce the need for Saudi security agencies to use proxies such as the IS-K against Iran, although Saudi Arabia will have noted that the US could not save its allies in Syria from defeat. Operations in Kabul are the easiest and cheapest way to reassure Gulf donors that the IS-K continues to ruthlessly hit Iranian targets. Iran has been successful in countering most IS-K efforts to establish networks near the Iranian border and the group does not seem to be in a position to invest major resources for this purpose.

CHAPTER 3

Peace or Elections: The Controversy Around Afghanistan's 2019 Presidential Poll

Afghanistan's electoral processes are a democratic façade, characterised by manipulation and violence, and overlapping elections for different bodies—all overseen by an incompetent Independent Electoral Commission. Presidential elections are scheduled for September 2019, with disputes from the October 2018 parliamentary elections still unresolved. As both cabinet and parliament are dysfunctional, the presidency's influence projects well beyond its actual constitutional powers. Many internal and external observers fear that the presidential election will collide with, and disrupt, the peace negotiations.

What's at stake?

The country's next presidential election—the fourth electoral cycle since the Taliban regime was toppled in 2001—had originally been scheduled for 20 April 2019. But the not-so-independent Independent Election Commission (IEC) decided to postpone them for three months to 20 July 2019, and then again to 28 September 2019. This brings the process outside the timeframe prescribed by the constitution.

Afghanistan has a mixed presidential-parliamentary political system that tilts towards its presidential side. This is even more the case in practice than on paper. Afghanistan is a highly centralised state built around a powerful executive president who, among other things, appoints all provincial and district governors, the members of various supposedly independent commissions, as well as other bodies such as the Supreme Court.

Presidential influence also includes the appointment of members of the main electoral institutions, the IEC and the Elections Complaints Commission (ECC), which act independently of each other. One

consequence of the tilt of Afghanistan's system of governance towards the president has been that non-presidential elections have received significantly less attention than presidential polls. All have been delayed, starting from the first one in 2005, in the framework of the Bonn Process. The latest parliamentary election was held three-and-a-half years after date required by the constitution, in October 2018. Preliminary results are complete but the final ones are still to be announced, hindered in part by complicated processes of complaints and adjudication.

Provincial council elections have been held with some regularity (in 2005, 2009 and 2014); they are now expected to run simultaneously with the postponed presidential election. There is another problem with the provincial council, however, and that is that the council's responsibilities vis-à-vis the provincial governors are only vaguely defined from a legal point of view. The first ever district council elections were planned to be held simultaneously with the parliamentary elections on 20 October 2018, but were dropped again due to a lack of organisational capacity.

It is difficult to imagine how all these elections, with the additional complication of rescheduling parliamentary elections in Ghazni province, can realistically be held in the summer of 2019. Afghanistan's electoral calendar in the long-term remains fraught with challenges. Cabinet and parliament are largely powerless. There is no prime minister. The creation of a Chief Executive position was a stop-gap measure taken after the 2014 presidential election to resolve a stalemate; President Ashraf Ghani's main 2014 contender, Abdullah Abdullah, has filled the position. There was a plan to hold a *loya jirga* to decide whether the position would be abolished, or turned into a nominal head of government. As with so many reforms and administrative measures, this never materialised.

Parliament was already sidelined starting with Ghani's predecessor, Hamid Karzai, who wanted a free hand. Although parliament needs to pass all major laws, a way was found to circumvent this through generous use of presidential decrees. These measures also need to go through parliament, but they often linger there for years, either

between the two houses or between parliament and the executive, while remaining in force. The absence of a constitutional court is sorely missed. This situation worsened in the last parliament's extended term, during which it was even more rare for MPs to reach the needed quorum for any valid decision. As parliament can censor ministers at any time, it has used this tactic regularly as a retaliatory measure against the executive, with the main result being that cabinet proceedings were obstructed, weakening its role even further.

Presidential elections in Afghanistan are seen as the most significant election in the country by many inside the country and several foreign governments supporting Afghanistan. This belief is where the problem begins. It implies that parliament and electoral delays do not matter when in fact they represent breaks in the constitutional order. This highlights the dysfunctionality, powerlessness and lack of sovereignty of Afghan political institutions, undermining them and damaging the checks-and-balances required for democracy. This context is crucial to understanding Afghanistan's current political problems.

What is the problem with the 2019 election?

In the view of many donor governments, particularly the US, and many Afghan politicians, presidential elections would stand in the way of a peace agreement with the Taliban. Currently, a US troop withdrawal and peace deal is being pursued by the US administration with new vigour. A 'general agreement' about a framework has been concluded; however, US troop withdrawal and Taliban assurances that Al-Qaeda-type terrorist groups would not be allowed to return to Afghanistan after the end of the war must still be agreed in detail. There is also no settlement on many other important issues, such as the future of the Afghan political system.

Should the upcoming presidential election unfold properly, it would strengthen both the legitimacy of the elected president and the political system in general. This, however, is not what the Taliban want. They demand the political system to be 'reformed'. These are colliding positions and make negotiations even more difficult. The

US negotiator has also considered prioritising ‘peace’ over elections, which further complicates the matter. Formally, as long as negotiations and a final agreement are outstanding, the current Afghan state needs to adhere to its own rules.

The negotiations cast doubt on the original timing of the elections (20 April 2019), as media reports indicated that the US envoy purportedly suggested postponing them. After repeated public assurances that the constitutionally set date would be met, the IEC and the Afghan government finally buckled. On 26 December 2018, the IEC announced that the elections would be delayed until 20 July 2019. And this may not be the final word.

This development reflects the unreliability of Afghanistan’s electoral institutions and the government backing them, but also the enormous external political pressure exerted on them. The pressure to submit to outside interests has been a hallmark of the ‘political process’ since 2001, especially when it comes to elections. Afghanistan’s electoral calendar has often been subjugated to the one in the US.

The Taliban have not laid out in any detail what kind of system they want, apart from the ‘Sharia caveat’, which is enshrined in Article 3 of the Afghan constitution. It is clear that the Taliban do not envisage a multi-party, one-person-one-vote parliamentary system, but one based on the *shura* principle, which some interpret as a form of Islamic democracy.

The ‘technical’ problems of Afghan elections

Although one finds many references to technical problems impeding the political process, many of the obstacles are in fact political in nature and difficult to resolve in the fragmented Afghan political landscape. References to these problems often serve as a pretext for delaying voting.

The performance of the IEC during the 2018 parliamentary polls has been dismal. It was the worst electoral process in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Once again, there was no reliable voter list. In previous

elections no part of the country had been disenfranchised, but on this occasion Ghazni province was. For the first time, an election had to be extended into a second day, as hundreds of polling centres did not open on time, or at all, on the day of voting. For the first time since 2001, an election was held based on two differently verified types of ballots. Ever since the elections in 2004, more Afghans were prevented from voting as security threats led to the closure of around one quarter of the polling centres even long before election day. There have never been fewer reports about how voting unfolded in the rural areas, suggesting a deep urban (vote) versus rural (no vote) gap. Never before had chaos broken out on election day itself; in earlier years, this tended to be confined to the counting and complaint period. Never before was the IEC unable to disclose how many polling centres and stations were really open.

All these problems did not suddenly appear in 2018. They are the result of issues left to fester for over eighteen years and that have compounded each other, and that are now extremely difficult to disentangle and resolve. To postpone or not to postpone has become a dilemma, as well as the question of whether to reform the electoral system. Simply stopping everything and going back to square one is nevertheless not an option. Afghans and their external backers would just face the same political players who created the problem in the first place.

The long list of organisational shortcomings adds to a precarious security situation in which the Taliban make growing gains in territorial and population control. This alone would render inclusive elections impossible, even if electoral institutions worked perfectly. Not to mention the 55 per cent of Afghans who live under the poverty line and have other problems to contend with aside from badly run elections.

The government itself exacerbated the situation with an ill-considered decision to insist on using biometric voter verification (BVV) technology, introduced at the last moment due to political pressure. This led to a conflict between the IEC and the ECC about which votes should be counted in the end. Only those biometrically verified,

or also paper-based ones? This situation was resolved through a shady compromise.

This author does not see how, with the same personnel and promises of reform, improvements to the electoral system and its legal framework can be achieved while carrying out the actual elections. This is especially true as the parliamentary polls are still being counted. What could not be resolved in the three and a half years leading up to the 2018 parliamentary poll will not be fixed in a few months. This is because the problems are essentially political.

One major issue is that the main political parties have learnt from earlier elections that vote manipulation, not voting, paves the way to victory and power. Those who have been armed actors at various stages of the last 40 years of conflict have not abandoned their belief that armed violence, or the threat thereof, is a practicable and effective means of seizing power.

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The delay in holding the upcoming presidential election achieves one positive outcome: it moves the date out of the first half of spring, a time when many areas are still snowed in and additional voters might be naturally disenfranchised. It also gives more time to the president's opponents to start their electoral campaigns and to improve their chances vis-à-vis the incumbent. This, however, would be important only if the result was determined exclusively by voting and irregularities were an exception, not a rule.

Who will run, and who will win?

It is too early to predict the probable winners of the upcoming presidential elections. The nomination campaign ended in January 2019, later than planned, and produced several candidates, including

top politicians. This includes the incumbent, President Ashraf Ghani (Pashtun) who can constitutionally run for a second, but last time; Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah (Tajik) and Ghani's former National Security Advisor, Hanif Atmar (Pashtun); Ahmad Wali Massud, a Tajik whose brother was assassinated by guerrilla leader Ahmad Shah Massud; and former head of intelligence, Rahmatullah Nabil, also a Pashtun. The candidates' ethnicity is important because it is a significant factor in voter decision-making and in the re-alignment among candidates between the first and an expected second round of voting, if no candidate passes the required 50 per cent threshold in round one. That is when the running usually hardens further along ethnic lines.

The list also includes some wild cards, such as former Hezb-e Islami insurgency leader Gulbuddin Hekmatyar; former foreign minister Zalmay Rassul and former interior minister and ex-leftist Nur-ul-Haq Ulumi; all of whom are Pashtuns. We know from earlier elections that some candidates run only in order to secure a post-election position from one of the candidates that reach the second round. As a result, there have been cases of candidates who withdrew in the last moment and even still gained votes, as their names remained on the printed ballots.

Two of the three leading candidates, Ghani and Atmar, have opted for a mixed ethnic running. In 2014, with Dostum, an Uzbek ran on Ghani's ticket. Abdullah's ticket is somewhat more complicated because he is the son of a Tajik and a Pashtun, and one of his vice-presidential candidates is a Hazara while the other, regardless of his ethnicity, is an ally of Dostum. Atmar, who is teamed up with former interior and education minister Yunus Qanuni, is also a Tajik and Hazara leader. Muhammad Mohaqqueq will tap into three ethnic vote banks: anti-Ghani Pashtuns, Tajiks and Hazaras.

There are also a number of formerly declared candidates, or powerful vote generators, who had been pulled out of the race in return for senior positions in the Ghani government; these include two former intelligence chiefs, Amrullah Saleh (Tajik) and Assadullah Khaled (Pashtun) as well as former interior minister Omar Daudzai (Pashtun).

The fact that they accepted their positions, however, does not mean that their followers will necessarily join the ranks of Ghani voters. Pre-election appointments are a proven presidential method to split the main opponents' vote banks.

Potential 'Tajik' candidates, such as former Balkh governor Atta Muhammad Noor, tried to use this method against Ashraf Ghani by luring over regional Pashtun leaders in eastern, southeastern and southern Afghanistan. Abdullah was publicly told by old-hand Jamiati Ismail Khan, from Herat, to let another candidate of the party run this time (Yunus Qanuni), but Abdullah might just give it another try regardless. As a result, it is possible for the first time in post-2001 Afghanistan that the incumbents may lose.

How to win an election?

How the election is won is a more important question than who wins. The IEC and the ECC decide the outcome of elections through mass disqualification of ballot boxes that might have been manipulated. The commissioners are therefore the targets of attempts to pressure and buy them out. The commissioners might also try to promote those politicians who played a part in their appointment.

It has become obvious over successive elections that those who control, even partly, the electoral institutions are the ones who have the ability to manipulate the system. Voters and votes do not really count. Voters cannot know in the end whether their votes are even counted, further decreasing popular trust in Afghan elections over time.

Conclusion

Another bad election would further increase the instability of the Afghan political system. The signs are not encouraging. The 2018 parliamentary elections were a test run and they failed.

As mentioned above, the use of force and the threat thereof remain on the cards. Whether there will be an outbreak of violence depends on how the elections and their aftermath are handled. The risk,

however, increases every time a powerful armed faction feels cheated out of victory. The stakes are higher than during the recent parliamentary polls (during which conflict is diluted among 34 constituencies), but even these elections are not over yet. Afghanistan's 'democratic' system is approaching a dangerous bend on the road supposedly leading to its stabilisation. So far, the democratic system is largely a democratic façade. It remains to be seen whether Western donors will continue to accept this.

The situation has become even gloomier with the threat of a rushed US troop withdrawal. This is likely to further undermine, if not lead to the collapse of the entire system. This warning should not be interpreted as a prophecy or as being overly pessimistic. Recent Afghan history has seen such collapses in 1973, 1978, 1992 and 1996.

There is only one solution, but it needs a considerable amount of time: real democratisation, institutional rejuvenation and elite change. This would require a new approach that is not donor-centric, and that prioritises Afghans' needs and interests, and not only the needs and interests of the elite. Another dilemma may be that even if such an approach were developed, Afghans would not necessarily trust Western intentions anymore. So a process of electoral and other reform, as well as of gradual democratisation, would also be needed to rebuild trust in donors.

One should not rely on the much-hyped young, educated, generation that is enmeshed in the same traditional system of patronage, and is often only too ready to play along. This applies to women, too.

CHAPTER 4

The Role of Regional Actors

Afghanistan's neighbours support many different groups within that country, and justify their interference by their own geopolitical, economic or religious interests. Peace would bring down much of the war economy and disadvantage many who have grown rich from it. Nevertheless, neighbours support the peace process for its potential to end regional instability, and all but India want the US to leave without establishing a permanent regional presence. None want a precipitous US withdrawal, which would provoke a new civil war.

This chapter summarises the role of regional actors in the Afghan conflict, seeking to identify the most significant ways that major players around the war-torn zone become involved. Such an exercise will always be vulnerable to oversimplification, and experts will disagree about elements of the analysis, in part because many actors disagree about their roles. Still, there is a broad consensus that most of Afghanistan's neighbours want to prevent the US from maintaining a long-term military foothold in their backyard. There also exists some level of regional agreement about the need to prevent the spread of instability. Disagreements are numerous and the neighbours are likely to continue supporting rival proxies. Still, some regional actors are also seeking to facilitate peace negotiations, in part to curb the escalating violence on their doorstep and secure a stake in an eventual political settlement.

A two-sided war

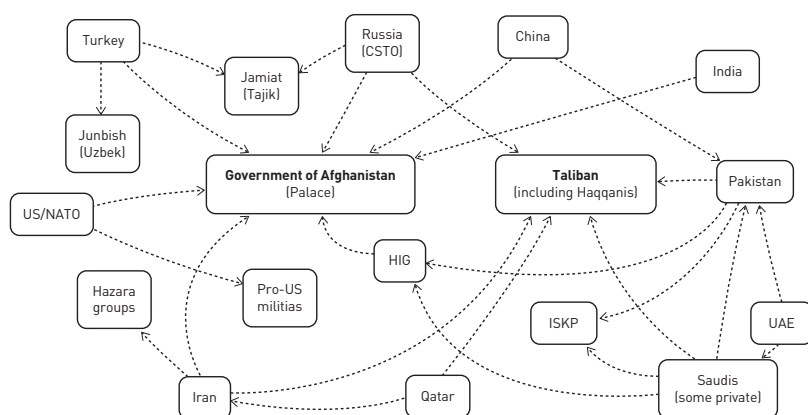
The war in Afghanistan involves many domestic and international parties, both state- and non-state. Not all of the details of these parties are equally relevant, however. The June 2018 ceasefire supported the idea of a simple, two-sided model of conflict: the Taliban fighting the US-backed government. Public declarations of a pause in hostilities

from the Afghan government and the US military, followed by Taliban reciprocation, resulted in a cessation of violence for three days across most of Afghanistan's territory³. "It was a controlled experiment", said President Ashraf Ghani. "It speaks about a discipline. You have an interlocutor [the Taliban] you need to take seriously"⁴. The Taliban are primarily a domestic actor, and most insurgents fight near their own home. The Taliban also govern locally on issues such as education, healthcare, justice and taxation⁵. Among the thousands of battles waged each year, nearly all of them involve pro-government forces fighting the Taliban. Conflict between these two sides accounted for more than 95 per cent of violent incidents in Afghanistan, making other militant groups a negligible factor on the battlefield⁶.

Many secondary parties

The role of secondary parties cannot be ignored. None of them individually have sufficient influence to control the war or dictate the terms of an eventual peace settlement, but their cumulative effect is substantial. Regional sources of support for the Taliban and other non-state actors have become clear in recent years with the growing scale of the insurgency and the increasing levels of direct assistance to the Taliban from nearby countries. Such assistance sometimes results from hedging strategies as regional powers seek local allies—Taliban, warlords, militia leaders—who can protect their interests within Afghanistan⁷. This results in some regional actors giving calibrated support to both sides of the conflict, and sometimes to competing factions within each. Figure 1 maps these overlapping lines of assistance, but should be considered illustrative and not exhaustive.

Figure 1. Simplified mapping of international support for conflict actors



Starting at the right of Figure 1 and moving clockwise: Pakistan and India play out their rivalry through their Afghanistan policies, with Pakistan seeking to preserve its regional influence by supporting the Taliban. Pakistan also backs a variety of militant groups such as the Islamic State- Khorasan (IS-K) and, formerly, Hizb-e Islami Gulbuddin (HIG), to maintain asymmetric threats against India and the US-backed government in Afghanistan. India cultivates strong relations with the Afghan government to unsettle Pakistan, including through ties to anti-Pakistan politicians and elements of the Afghan security forces. Donors in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries serve as a fundraising base for the Taliban, but also support the Taliban's rivals, the IS-K and HIG. Qatar serves as a diplomatic outpost for the Taliban, while supporting Iran's policy in the region against its rivals in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia. Iran backs the Afghan government but also provides limited support to the Taliban, for example against the IS-K groups near the Iranian border. Iran also recruits from Hazara groups for Shiite militias operating in Syria and Iraq. Turkey safeguards the Turkic peoples of the north via strongmen such as Rashid Dostum of the Uzbek-dominated Junbish Party, and, to a lesser extent, through figures such as Atta Muhammad Noor of the Jamiat Party. Russia and other members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) pursue a buffer strategy, supporting the Kabul-based government while building relationships with armed groups. Russia has also recently cultivated relations with the Taliban, seeking to embarrass the US and hasten the departure of its troops.

China maintains warm relationships with both Afghanistan and Pakistan, while pursuing a narrow counter-terrorism effort against ethnic Uighurs with cooperation from many actors, including the Taliban⁸.

The United States and its allies

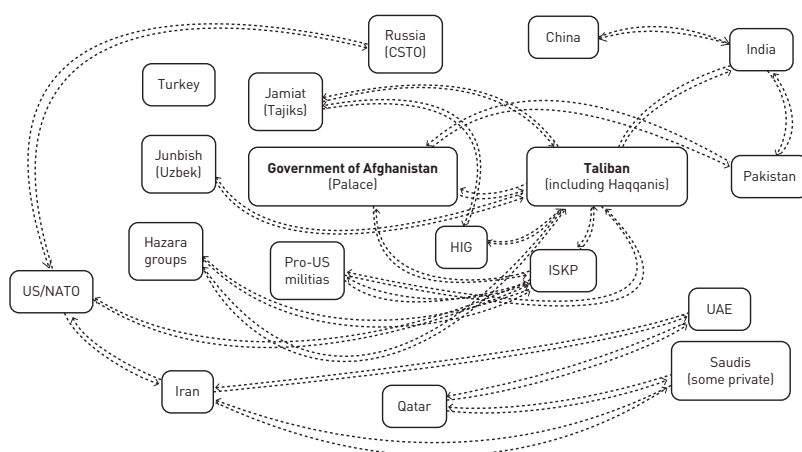
The actors on the left side of Figure 1, the US and its allies, have had the most important influence on the conflict since 2001. Western powers shaped the war from the original decision at the Bonn conference to include representatives from many armed factions, but exclude the Taliban⁹. The government that emerged from the Bonn process was dominated by leading figures who had fought the Taliban in previous decades. Some of the most prominent anti-Taliban figures were promoted to senior positions. Support for the Afghan government and security forces insulated the government from considerations about peace, and generated incentives to extend the conflict¹⁰. The US and its allies have also pursued a counter-terrorism campaign in Afghanistan since 2001, and maintaining this effort remains the primary US rationale for a continued military presence¹¹. The international community also pursues a normative agenda in Afghanistan, seeking to promote human rights—including women's rights—and liberal democratic values¹². This alienates actors inside and outside of Afghanistan who disagree with Western norms and provokes resistance among regional actors opposed to the US. Washington also continues to support militias independently from the Afghan forces, complicating further the political situation¹³.

Regional tensions

Another way of picturing the regional role would be to re-examine the actors listed in Figure 1 through a lens of conflict rather than support. Figure 2 seeks to portray the major lines of tension between the primary and secondary parties to the conflict. This diagram omits some patterns of conflict that are short-lived or remain latent: for example, the rivalries between Junbish, Jamiat, HIG and Hazara groups and the Presidential Palace, which may shift during the anticipated election season of 2019. No lines are drawn between Iran

and HIG because it is now unclear whether the historical tensions between Gulbuddin Hekmatyar and Tehran have been resolved; similarly between HIG and Russia. Arrows are depicted in both directions between Pakistan and Afghanistan, even though Islamabad claims that no hostilities exist between the two countries. In fact, skirmishing along the Durand Line and Pakistan's sheltering of Taliban leaders indicate tensions.

Figure 2. Simplified mapping of regional tensions and domestic implications



Business interests

The actors depicted in Figures 1 and 2 can be sub-divided into factions, with the most notable cross-cutting issue being the war economy. Senior figures on all sides have profited handsomely from the war: among government officials, political opposition groups, the Taliban, regional governments and regional security forces. The war economy provides incentives for maintaining the *status quo*, or minor jockeying to improve commercial standing, and disincentives for major changes such as a peace agreement. In May 2016, when a drone strike killed then-Taliban leader Akhtar Mansur in Pakistan, feuds emerged among senior insurgents about the USD 900 million that reportedly went missing from his bank accounts. On the opposite side of the war, some well-known figures among the Afghan elite are reportedly billionaires. Such fortunes often reflect involvement with Afghanistan's opium industry, which has grown significantly since 2001 and now dominates the world market¹⁴. Opium thrives in zones of lawlessness, along with other illicit businesses such as the weapons trade, timber

smuggling and illegal mining¹⁵. Legal businesses associated with the conflict also represent the largest non-agricultural employer, either directly with security forces or indirectly with trucking, logistics, construction, fuel supply, private security and other industries¹⁶. This poses a challenge to any future peace process: successful peace negotiations may shrink the war economy, endangering livelihoods.

Conclusion

The overriding suspicion in the region has been that the US wants permanent military bases in South Asia. A lingering US troop presence of the kind in South Korea is unacceptable to Iran, Pakistan, Russia and China. India on the other hand seeks a long-term US commitment. That makes the news of a potential US drawdown reason for cautious optimism among most major regional actors. The neighbours may be less inclined to disrupt US policy if they believe that Washington will eventually give up its strategic foothold on their doorstep. But just because the neighbours want a US exit does not mean they seek an abrupt withdrawal. All sides recognise that a precipitous pull-out could spark a new civil war that would destabilise the region. The neighbours do not enjoy surprises, and uncertain signals from the White House cause anxiety.

To some extent, this anxiety could provoke constructive thinking. Regional powers with a stake in Afghanistan now face hard decisions about how to shape the post-US future. They could assist with peace talks to calm their neighbourhood. They could reinforce their backing of Afghan proxies that fuel civil war or, more likely, they could pursue both tracks. Public statements from regional diplomats will not reveal much about their plans; a better indicator would be the flow of weapons and support for proxy forces. Hopeful signals emerged in 2018 as the regional powers positioned themselves as facilitators of peace talks, sometimes in cooperation with the US. It remains to be seen whether these diplomatic interventions will prove constructive in 2019. Regional policy on Afghanistan stands at a crossroads.

CHAPTER 5

Russian and Chinese Influence in Afghanistan

Both Russia and China want to contain jihadist extremism to within Afghanistan's borders. Russia fears cross-border contagion into Central Asia. China is attempting to suppress discontent in Xinjiang, which borders for a short distance on Afghanistan. For both, a prolonged stalemate enabled by US assistance to the government of Afghanistan is preferable to the risks of a Taliban government, despite the Taliban assurance that it is focused only on Afghanistan. As the US prepares to leave, Moscow and Beijing have established contacts with the Taliban.

While their interests and involvement in Afghanistan are not identical, Moscow and Beijing share one overriding concern: preventing the rise of Islamist forces that each sees as having an 'internationalist' agenda. Moscow fears that the rise of the Taliban could lead to its ascent in former Soviet Central Asia and in the Muslim-majority regions of Russia itself. Beijing, on the other hand, is concerned that it could strengthen Muslim opposition to Chinese Communist Party rule in its Xinjiang province.

Despite their many differences with the US, both Russia and China acquiesced to (and Moscow even supported) the US-led military presence in Afghanistan as a means of furthering their goal. With the recent drawdown of US and allied forces from Afghanistan, however, the Kremlin and Beijing have been preparing for the complete departure of these forces by working with the beleaguered Kabul government and cooperating with the Taliban and Pakistan, its principal external backer. While both major powers previously saw the Taliban as a threat, they now see it as an ally against more radical movements such as the Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)¹⁷ and the East Turkestan Liberation Front, of which they are far more fearful.

Russia's policy towards Afghanistan has nevertheless been more active than China's both in the past and at present. The Soviet Union maintained good relations with and provided significant aid to the Afghan monarchy until its downfall in 1973, and the republic that replaced it until its own overthrow by Marxist forces in 1978. The USSR intervened militarily in support of the Marxist regime at the end of 1979 and conducted a fruitless counter-insurgency campaign against the regime's opponents, who were being supported by several countries including the United States, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, China and Iran (both under the Shah and the Islamic Republic). Soviet forces withdrew in 1988-1989, but the USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev continued to support the Marxist regime in Kabul. This support ended with the downfall of the USSR and the rise of Yeltsin in Russia at the end of 1991. The Marxist regime fell a few months later and was replaced by an Islamic Republic dominated by northerners who had fought against the Soviet occupation. When this regime was in turn ousted by the Taliban, a movement dominated by Pashtuns from southern Afghanistan, Moscow quickly made common cause with its former adversaries from the north to prevent the Taliban from overrunning the entire country. Indeed, prior to the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, Russia and Iran were the two external powers providing military support for the Taliban's internal opponents. And Russia had good reason to do so: in addition to playing host to Al-Qaeda, the Taliban allowed the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan to operate from northern Afghanistan and launch raids into former Soviet Central Asia in 1999 and 2000.

After the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the United States, Russia's new president, Vladimir Putin, not only supported the US-led intervention in Afghanistan, he even approved the establishment of a US military presence in the former Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan to facilitate this. Russian-US relations, though, would soon deteriorate over a number of issues, and in 2005, President Putin began calling for the departure of US forces from Central Asia. Yet despite their many differences, President Putin continued to support the US-led efforts in Afghanistan, especially through the establishment of the Northern Distribution Network that offered the US an alternative supply route from the one through its troublesome partner,

Pakistan, which was simultaneously aiding the Taliban. But with the rise of the IS-K and its spread to Afghanistan, the drawdown of US and allied forces, and the increasing vulnerability of the Kabul government, Moscow came to see the Taliban as preferable to the IS-K. While Moscow views the IS-K as having an internationalist agenda designed to spread jihad into Central Asia, it now sees the Taliban's aims as being limited to Afghanistan. Moscow has held frequent talks with Taliban officials and has joined them in calling for the departure of US and allied forces from the country. At the same time, Moscow is providing security assistance to the Kabul government and promotes itself as a mediator in reaching a settlement between Kabul and the Taliban.

China had preferential ties with Pakistan prior to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. Seeing the USSR as its principal opponent, China supported Pakistani and Western backing for the Afghan *mujahedeen* fighting against Soviet occupation. Just as Moscow saw the Taliban as supporting Islamists in Central Asia, Beijing feared their support for Islamists in Xinjiang, where there was a growing Muslim opposition movement against Chinese rule. While China did not join in the US-led intervention in Afghanistan in 2001, it seemed to view the coalition presence as an obstacle to Afghanistan becoming a safe haven for Islamist movements seeking change in Xinjiang. China has provided some security assistance to the Kabul government and reportedly has established a small military base on Afghan territory near the Chinese border. With the drawdown of US and allied forces, Beijing has also been talking with the Taliban as well as continuing to cooperate with Pakistan, which has remained China's chief partner in the region.

Some have raised the possibility that as US influence in Afghanistan wanes, Russian and Chinese interests might start to compete with each other in this theatre. But based on how Russia and China have behaved in Central Asia, this seems unlikely. There, Moscow and Beijing seem content with a division of labour whereby Russia provides security in the region while China focuses on economic development, in a manner that benefits Chinese interests. In Afghanistan, China has greater economic interests than Russia, but

both regional great powers have very modest commercial and investment ties with Afghanistan. In 2017, Afghanistan imported USD 1.15 billion worth of goods from China. Although this made China Afghanistan's top import supplier, such an amount was economically derisory for Beijing, as was the mere USD 3.44 million worth of goods that Afghanistan exported to China. Russia had even less economic interaction with Afghanistan: in 2017, Afghanistan's imports from Russia amounted to just USD 157 million, while its exports to Russia were worth a paltry USD 1.15 million.

China's main interest is to ensure that Islamist forces in Afghanistan do not threaten Xinjiang. Beijing sees Russian policy there as serving this goal, and so it is supportive of Moscow's dual approach of supporting Kabul and working with an internally-focused Taliban.

Moscow's working with opposing sides simultaneously in Afghanistan is not unusual, but rather characteristic of its policy in many conflicts between and within states—between Israel and Iran, the Gulf Arabs and Iran, and opposing parties in Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and even Syria to some extent. Moscow may prefer the stalemate between Kabul and the Taliban to continue, but if the Taliban were to prevail, Moscow would want to have good relations and work with it against IS-K. As recent Russian commentary indicates, Moscow now seems convinced that the Taliban no longer poses a threat to Russia.

China's main interest is to ensure that Islamist forces in Afghanistan do not threaten Xinjiang.

Both of these scenarios, though, pose risks for Moscow. A stalemate between Kabul and the Taliban, in which both remain focused on each other, might allow the IS-K and other such forces to grow more powerful. On the other hand, if the Taliban prevails over its internal opponents, it may return to supporting jihadist groups targeting other countries as it did from 1996 to 2001. It is possible, of course, that if the Taliban returns to power, it will indeed confine its activities to Afghanistan, as its representatives have been saying to all who want to hear. The Taliban's doing so, however, may result in its more radical elements defecting to the IS-K or similar groups.

Concern about the IS-K is not the only reason why Moscow is willing to work with the Taliban. Russia has joined it in calling for the departure of US and allied forces from Afghanistan. Indeed, there are many in Moscow who seem to relish the idea of the US leaving in defeat like the USSR did in 1989. But just as Moscow was calling a few years ago for the US to withdraw its military forces from Central Asia while keeping them in Afghanistan, Moscow may now actually prefer US military assistance to Kabul to continue even if coalition forces depart. This would hedge against the risks entailed in a Taliban victory and maintain US funding to Kabul so that it can continue buying Russian weapons and other goods that it might be unable to afford otherwise and that Moscow does not want to subsidise.

While the security situation in Afghanistan has been growing more precarious, neither Russian nor Chinese interests have suffered much so far. Moscow and Beijing can be said to benefit from the fact that all the contending parties are too weak to prevail but strong enough to keep their opponents in check. The failure of the US and its allies to defeat Kabul's enemies means that the US cannot use Afghanistan as a secure base from which to spread Western influence into Central Asia. The continued US presence, though, has meant that the Taliban forces, which Moscow and Beijing saw as a threat, did not prevail, and the US and its allies were the ones that took on the main burden of ensuring that did not happen.

Outlook

Combined with the rise of the IS-K, the drawdown of US and allied forces from Afghanistan (as well as President Trump's promise to reduce their numbers even further) has significantly altered the situation. While the decline of the US and allied military presence portends a shifting of the burden of combating jihadist forces onto Russia and China, the IS-K's rise has helped cast the Taliban in the role of an organisation seeking only domestic change and sharing its neighbours' interest in defeating the IS-K. This may allow Moscow and Beijing to maintain a balancing act in which no side can prevail inside Afghanistan nor target their interests. But the situation remains precarious. Russia and China could face a more serious problem

should the US and its allies withdraw indeed and either the Taliban come to power and revive its internationalist ambitions or no one is able to prevent the IS-K from becoming powerful enough to do so. If jihadist forces are to be prevented from harming their interests, Beijing and Moscow will have to shoulder much more of the costs. The most likely way in which they would share this burden is through China providing the economic support needed for Russia somehow to manage the security situation. Still, the terms of such an agreement could cause friction between them, especially if Moscow sees Beijing providing economic assistance on terms unfavourable to Russia for a task that Russia sees as benefiting them both.

This worst case, from Russia's viewpoint has not yet emerged and the Kremlin and Beijing will work hard to ensure that it does not. While they may not admit it publicly, one way for them to make sure that the worst does not come to pass as well as to minimise their costs is for the US and its allies to maintain a sufficient presence in Afghanistan to ensure that neither the Taliban nor the IS-K prevail.

CHAPTER 6

The Prospects for Peace

Afghans have lived with repeating cycles of violence, corruption and government collapse, often featuring the same destructive personalities. The US wants to promote a transitional agreement and leave the details to be worked out between the Taliban and the current government. The US prefers to withdraw as soon as feasible from Afghanistan. A short-term peace between a strong and confident Taliban and a perpetually weak government is possible, but attempts to construct a long-term settlement are not likely to succeed and the pattern of government collapse and civil war would then be repeated.

Afghans are ready for peace. With each successive government they have been ready for peace, but each time peace has eluded them. It is unlikely to be different this time. To understand why that is, one must understand the past, and more specifically why and where Afghanistan is today, without valourising or eulogising contributions, both in lives lost and money spent.

Seventeen years after the world rallied to oust the Taliban, the movement now holds sway in half the country. Corruption is so rampant you have to pay a bribe just to pay your utility bill. The Afghan National Security Forces are poorly trained, poorly equipped, and reinforcements rarely arrive in a timely fashion. Most Afghans see their own government, the US and its neighbours as villains. And a 2018 Gallup poll said Afghans hold no hope that their future will be better than their present, which they say is increasingly dismal and dangerous.

Lawlessness is at frightening levels in the cities and in the villages. Many of the crimes are perpetrated by the local police force, set up with US funding and at the behest of the international community,

despite the warnings of locals. This force has further alienated people from their government and the international community. Militias loyal to warlords have been regularised by receiving Interior Ministry registration. Ethnic divisions have deepened and in a country where sectarianism was never a problem, terrified Shia are fleeing their homeland. In addition, the Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan (IS-K)¹⁸ are in competition for territory.

Power through violence

Over the past four decades, Afghans have lived through successive governments, all of which have come to power through violence. The former Soviet Union invaded in 1979, claiming to be invited to protect the pro-Moscow government of Babrak Karmal. When the USSR left, Kabul's Communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan government hung on for another three years until the *mujahedeen*, who were called freedom fighters by the United States, took power.

The names of those *mujahedeen* leaders, who were installed in Kabul in 1992, will sound familiar to anyone following today's Afghanistan. They were Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, Hamid Karzai, Abdur Rasool Sayyaf, Ismail Khan, Atta Mohammad, Rashid Dostum... The list goes on. This is important to know and remember in the larger context of where Afghanistan is today, because unbridled corruption and relentless squabbling characterised their rule from 1992 to 1996 as it has their rule after 2001.

Allowing these same people to lead a post-2001 Afghanistan and in the interim 18 years grow in strength, influence and wealth was a devastating mistake, from which it is difficult to recover. Their presence, influence, accumulated wealth and heavily armed militias are important obstacles to a lasting peace. After these *mujahedeen* destroyed most of Kabul and killed tens of thousands of people, the Taliban took power in 1996. They ruled with a heavy hand until 2001. Afghans celebrated their departure. Again they hoped that the new government would (finally) be better than the last. But the post-2001 regime has proven to be no different than previous ones. The

difference is that the repercussions of failure are far graver than at any time in the past. This time, it was quite literally the world that had come to Afghanistan to rid the country of the Taliban, and for Afghans, this represented their best chance for prosperity, justice, freedom and peace. That this did not happen has devastated the hopes of many for their future.

Life under Taliban rule

The Taliban's rule offered no justice, freedom or lasting peace. It was marked by an international boycott that was economically devastating for Afghans. The heavy handed approach denied rights to women and girls, but the Taliban imposed restrictions and edicts which also angered many men, including many who counted as Taliban. And yet there was stability. Criminals had been disarmed and many had fled the country (only to return with the Taliban's overthrow at the end of 2001). There was no lawlessness. The taking of bribes was exceptional. Travel throughout the country, with the exception of a small enclave in northern Takhar province, where Ahmad Shah Massoud and the Northern Alliance still held some control, was safe any time of day or night.

The Taliban carried out public punishments almost weekly, but that is no different than what is the weekly Friday practice in Saudi Arabia. The legal system that led to the punishments were suspect and closed to public scrutiny, but that, too, is true in Saudi Arabia where courts are closed and defence lawyers are provided by the state. It is also true that there was no freedom for women in Taliban Afghanistan, but what is also true is that at the end of 2018—after nearly 18 years of international engagement—the World Index says Afghanistan is the second worst country in the world to be a woman.

The reality is that Afghanistan was and is a deeply conservative culture governed largely by ancient traditions that are also reflected in their interpretation of Islam and its edicts. For all of these reasons, simply getting rid of the Taliban was never going to be enough to properly secure Afghanistan's future as a country at peace.

In pre-2001 Afghanistan, there was next to no international engagement. As a result, wild and scary exaggerations of what had occurred during the Taliban rule became fact. And in a post-2001 Afghanistan, the very ones who had given rise to the Taliban were re-invented as heroes with giant monuments to the likes of Ahmad Shah Massood, whose militias, along with Abdur Rasool Sayyaf's, had killed thousands of Hazaras during their last rule. Hazaras at the time of the monument's construction said they could say nothing for fear of being called Taliban.

...simply getting rid of the Taliban was never going to be enough to properly secure Afghanistan's future as a country at peace.

The reality is that neither side is better or worse than the other, but the more important reality is that neither side is a viable partner for long-term peace and this is the real dilemma of the Afghanistan of 2019. Despite the presence of 42 countries with a combined military force of 150,000 soldiers in Afghanistan, the war is lost, though it was never clear what winning was to look like. It is also not clear whether any of those countries who sent their soldiers to Afghanistan had clearly formulated a picture of what victory amounted to.

Benchmarks vs sustainability

There were some vaguely prescribed notions of a constitution, elections and a national security force, but the success of these vague notions was measured not by the quality or sustainability of any of them but by pre-assigned benchmarks. A constitution was written, but it was one that gave overreaching powers to the office of the president. Elections were held and each successive one was more corrupt than the previous poll. Finally, the conduct of the 2014 elections had proven to be so corrupt that the US stepped in to declare there would be no winner or results announced. Instead the two leading candidates would share power and a unity government was cobbled together. As in the past, unity eluded them.

Lessons unlearned

What is particularly telling is that by the period 2014-2013, there was still so little understanding or knowledge of Afghanistan and its history that the US and its allies thought a unity government could even be a solution. In 1992, many of these same leaders who make up the power behind the two factions in the present unity government went to Mecca and swore on the Quran that they would adhere to an agreement. They promptly returned, threw aside the agreement and began killing each other.

In 2014 they did not kill each other, but their squabbling and bickering has paralysed parliament, further entrenched power structures and, most devastatingly, have succeeded in deepening ethnic divisions.

A National Security Force of 350,000 soldiers and police were inducted into service to meet another benchmark, but most received barely four weeks of training and their weapons were often considered second rate. In 2011, first-hand observation identified that the ill-trained Afghan army had one helmet for every five soldiers. Even in 2011, Afghan soldiers were not allowed to use live fire when training with US troops.

But the benchmark was met and boots were on the ground—many of them with holes in them because the contract for the boots had gone to some warlord's relative. The United Nations insisted it wanted to have a small footprint. Why would you want a small footprint in a country devastated by three decades of war? A sasquatch-size UN footprint was needed.

The Afghanistan of January 2019 is remarkably similar to the Afghanistan of 1992 to 1996. The only reason rockets are not raining down on Kabul today is because of the presence of foreign forces in Afghanistan.

Past to future to past again

Today, the US-led coalition is where the former Soviet Union was in 1986-1987, talking national reconciliation and holding 'proximity'

talks. The participants then were the former Soviet Union's proxies in Kabul and the US-backed *mujahedeen*. Today it is the US-backed proxies in Kabul and the Taliban, currently aided and/or wooed by neighbours: Pakistan, Iran, Russia and China.

Today, Washington's peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad is the go-between in proximity talks between the Taliban and Afghan government representatives, while at the same time working to orchestrate 'direct' talks. The Taliban, however, is steadfast in its refusal to talk to Kabul, willing at least for the moment to talk only to the US. Mr. Khalilzad has had a hand in post-2001 Afghanistan since the Taliban's collapse. First he was US President George Bush's special representative, and then US ambassador to Afghanistan. So the way Afghanistan looks today is in no small part the result of Mr. Khalilzad's earlier involvement.

The decision to send more troops was made, like most decisions since 2001, with no long-term strategy in mind.

Since September 2018, in his latest incarnation as US peace envoy, Mr. Khalilzad has made it clear that he is a man in a hurry. This is understandable given US President Donald Trump's statements criticising his generals and his often-stated disinterest in staying in Afghanistan. President Trump was opposed in August 2018 to sending more troops to Afghanistan, but then buckled to his generals. He was in fact right. The presence of a few thousand more troops meant more US money being spent and to little effect. The decision to send more troops was made, like most decisions since 2001, with no long-term strategy in mind.

Talks and who is talking

The Taliban have been insistent on talking directly to the US because they understood when they were last in power that if Washington is against you, no matter what you do you will never be an acceptable partner to any government. They also understand that the current government in Kabul is bitterly divided, and the interlocutors that

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has put forward are weak, and do not have widespread support in Kabul. Various power structures are trying to be heard. Hamid Karzai leads only one.

By comparison the Taliban negotiating team in Doha has been strengthened with the induction of the five Guantanamo Bay prisoners, who were released in 2013 in exchange for US Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl. These five are formidable and remain so among the Taliban, and more importantly among the fighters on the ground, even the newer generation.

The former Guantanamo prisoners include Mohammad Fazle, the former Taliban army chief, and Khairullah Khairkhwah, former Herat Governor and intelligence chief, whose involvement has given considerable strength to the Taliban team. The others are Abdul Haq Wasiq, who is about 45 and served as the Taliban Deputy Minister of intelligence; Mullah Norullah Nori, who is about 50, notorious for attacks on Shia during the Taliban reign and held senior positions in northern Afghanistan; and Mohammed Nabi, who in the 1990s was security chief in Zabul province. Add to the equation Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, a co-founder of the Taliban who was recently released from nearly eight years in a Pakistani jail, and the Taliban team is strong. A recent indication of the team's strength was its ability to bring three representatives of the Haqqani Network to the December 2018 meetings in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

It should be noted that the release of Baradar underscores Pakistan's readiness to push for negotiations. Pakistan has influence. Its influence is not unlimited, but Islamabad appears ready to use it to push the Taliban into direct talks.

Regional powers

Since his appointment, Zalmay Khalilzad has convinced Pakistan to release at least ten Taliban prisoners, including Baradar and Abdul Samad Sami, a US-designated terrorist who served as the Afghan Central Bank governor during the militants' rule. This is significant because Pakistan released several it had previously refused to release.

What is also significant is Zalmay Khalilzad's use of regional powers to pressure the Taliban, involving not only Pakistan but also Saudi Arabia and the UAE, where many Taliban have businesses.

The Taliban are under pressure but they are also pushing back. The Saudis have been pressing hard for them to meet directly with the Afghan government. They are unwilling to do so and as a result a meeting in Jeddah was scuttled. They are standing firm on their refusal to meet the Kabul authorities directly without some prior guarantees from the US. The Guantanamo Five are particularly insistent because they also understand they need something for the Taliban in the field to support sitting down with the regime about which they have deep reservations. But on other occasions the Taliban have succumbed to the pressure. They did not want to attend the UAE meetings, but they did. They also did not want to send a delegation to Pakistan when the army chief called them to Islamabad in October ahead of the UAE meeting.

The question is how much pressure can they resist? And perhaps an even more cogent question: what is the value of having them sit with Kabul while it is so deeply divided?

The greater headache at this stage in the talks is President Ashraf Ghani's stubborn refusal to create a team that can talk to the Taliban. He has dug in his heels demanding they talk now. He was outraged that they refused to meet Afghanistan's National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib when he was in the UAE. Infuriated by their refusal, he appointed Amrullah Saleh and Asadullah Khaleed to the interior and defence ministries. Neither man is a peacemaker.

The Taliban and Khalilzad have so far discussed foreign troop withdrawal; prisoner releases and exchanges, including the two professors kidnapped from the American University in Kabul; an interim government; and a ceasefire. Zalmay Khalilzad is not seeking a peace agreement. He wants the two sides to decide on a roadmap to the future, which effectively leaves all the details to be worked out after the US has left Afghanistan.

Mr. Khalilzad would not have taken this job unless he was pretty sure he could force a deal and he has moved fast and purposefully. Pakistan has given in on prisoners. It is likely Pakistan will get more from the US in exchange for its cooperation, perhaps on trade matters. Its economy is a mess and a free trade deal with the US or some quota concessions will be welcomed, as would concessions on the International Monetary Fund (IMF) deal it needs. The UAE and Saudi Arabia are competing to be in President Trump's good books so will do what they can. Iran needs a deal and has limited options. China wants a deal for its mega projects in Pakistan to proceed peacefully. As well, Beijing hopes for more projects in Afghanistan. Russia too, wants a deal so Moscow will not likely be a spoiler.

The Taliban also want a deal because they understand they can never take control of Afghanistan's cities from outside. They have political ambitions, but for the time being they seem to be more regionally focused than seeking a complete take-over.

US agenda

The likeliest scenario is that Mr. Khalilzad will indeed cobble together a deal but long-term peace is not his agenda. His aim is rather to reach an agreement that allows a US troop withdrawal to take place at the conclusion of a negotiated agreement between the two warring sides. When it breaks down—and it will eventually—it will be seen as an Afghan failure, not a US one.

Endnotes

- 1 IS in Khorasan is a 'province' of the militant Islamist group the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), which is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan.
- 2 The TTP is an Islamist armed group, which is an umbrella organisation of various militant groups based in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province along the Afghan border in Pakistan.
- 3 "Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire", International Crisis Group, Asia Report N° 298, 19 July 2018.
- 4 "NATO Engages Day 2: A Conversation with Mohammad Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai", German Marshall Fund, 16 July 2018. See also Asia Report N° 298 op. cit.
- 5 Ashley Jackson, "Life Under the Taliban Shadow Government", ODI, June 2018.
- 6 "Building on Afghanistan's Fleeting Ceasefire", *op. cit.*, p. 6.
- 7 "Mapping the Sources of Tension and the Interests of Regional Powers in Afghanistan and Pakistan" presentation, Barcelona Centre for International Affairs, December 2012.
- 8 The actors themselves disavow many of these relationships. For further reading: Matt Waldman and Matthew Wright, "Who Wants What: Mapping the Parties' Interests in the Afghanistan Conflict", Chatham House, July 2014. See also Barnett Rubin, "Is Afghanistan Ready for Peace? How Great Powers Can End the War", *Foreign Affairs*, 30 July 2018.
- 9 Ahmed Sajjad, "The Exclusion of the Taliban from Afghanistan's State-Building and Its Human Security Vulnerabilities", *International Academic Forum Journal of Politics, Economics & Law*, Vol. 4, Issue 1, Spring 2017.
- 10 In July 2016, the NATO conference in Warsaw raised pledges of almost USD 5 billion annually for the Afghan security forces until 2020, and many Afghan officials express confidence that the funding will be renewed.
- 11 "Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia", 21 August 2017.
- 12 In a September 2018 speech, UN envoy Tadamichi Yamamoto noted that an Afghan girl born in 2001 would now be almost an adult. "That girl is now almost a woman, who soon will be old enough to vote, old enough to attend university, old enough to pursue the vocation of her dreams. Will she be able to?" Briefing to the United Nations Security Council by the Secretary-General's Special Representative for Afghanistan, New York, 17 September 2018.
- 13 Mujib Mashal, "C.I.A.'s Afghan Forces Leave a Trail of Abuse and Anger", *The New York Times*, 31 December 2018.
- 14 "Afghanistan opium survey 2017", United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, May 2018.
- 15 "War in the Treasury of the People", *Global Witness*, June 2016.

- 16 At the peak of international military presence in 2012, about 40 per cent of the population lived within five kilometres of the 800 military bases across the country. With so many people living near foreign troops, many found employment in related industries. International military bases were reduced to one or two per cent of the peak number within a few years.
- 17 Daesh in Khorasan is a 'province' of Daesh, otherwise known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Daesh is the Arabic acronym for the group.
- 18 Daesh in Khorasan is an affiliate of Daesh, the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State for Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). D-K is active in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

ANNEX A

Agenda

AFGHANISTAN:

THE PRECARIOUS STRUGGLE FOR STABILITY

An unclassified workshop of the Academic Outreach program
of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS)

21 January 2019, Ottawa

AGENDA

- | | |
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| 8:30 - 8:45 | Opening remarks: Context and objectives of the workshop |
| 8:45 - 10:15 | Module 1 - Afghanistan's domestic political scene |
| 10:15 - 10:30 | Break |
| 10:30 - 11:30 | Module 2 - Regional dynamics and power plays |
| 11:30 - 12:00 | Module 3 - The Afghanistan of tomorrow |
| 12:00 - 12:15 | Closing comments |
| 12:15 | Adjourn |

ANNEX B

Academic Outreach at CSIS

Intelligence in a shifting world

It has become a truism to say that the world today is changing at an ever faster pace. Analysts, commentators, researchers and citizens from all backgrounds—in and outside government—may well recognise the value of this cliché, but most are only beginning to appreciate the very tangible implications of what otherwise remains an abstract statement.

The global security environment, which refers to the various threats to geopolitical, regional and national stability and prosperity, has changed profoundly since the fall of Communism, marking the end of a bipolar world organised around the ambitions of, and military tensions between, the United States and the former USSR. Quickly dispelling the tempting end of history theory of the 1990s, the 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, as well as subsequent events of a related nature in different countries, have since further affected our understanding of security.

Globalisation, the rapid development of technology and the associated sophistication of information and communications have influenced the work and nature of governments, including intelligence services. In addition to traditional state-to-state conflict, there now exist a wide array of security challenges that cross national boundaries, involve non-state actors and sometimes even non-human factors. Those range from terrorism, illicit networks and global diseases to energy security, international competition for resources, and the security consequences of a deteriorating natural environment globally. The elements of national and global security have therefore grown more complex and increasingly interdependent.

What we do

It is to understand those current and emerging issues that CSIS launched, in September 2008, its academic outreach program. By drawing regularly on knowledge from experts and taking a multidisciplinary, collaborative approach in doing so, the Service plays an active role in fostering a contextual understanding of security issues for the benefit of its own experts, as well as the researchers

and specialists we engage. Our activities aim to shed light on current security issues, to develop a long-term view of various security trends and problems, to challenge our own assumptions and cultural bias, as well as to sharpen our research and analytical capacities.

To do so, we aim to:

- Tap into networks of experts from various disciplines and sectors, including government, think-tanks, research institutes, universities, private business and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Canada and abroad. Where those networks do not exist, we may create them in partnership with various organisations; and
- Stimulate the study of issues related to Canadian security and the country's security and intelligence apparatus, while contributing to an informed public discussion about the history, function and future of intelligence in Canada.

The Service's academic outreach program resorts to a number of vehicles. It supports, designs, plans and/or hosts several activities, including conferences, seminars, presentations and round-table discussions.

While the academic outreach program does not take positions on particular issues, the results of some of its activities are released on the Canada.ca web site. By publicising the ideas emerging from its activities, the program seeks to stimulate debate and encourage the flow of views and perspectives between the Service, organisations and individual thinkers.

