

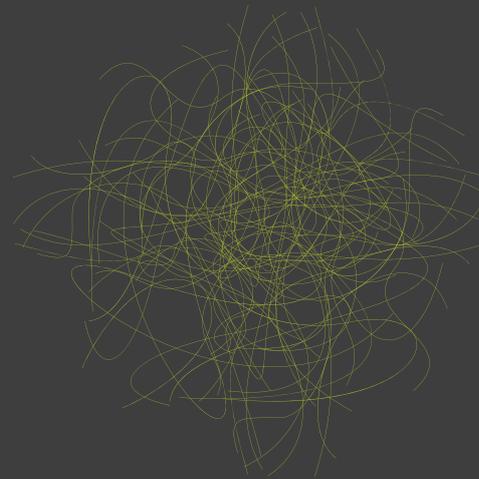
**Sources of Tension
in Afghanistan and
Pakistan: A Regional
Perspective**

**Afghanistan:
Stakeholder
Perceptions
& Expectations**

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1. INTRODUCTION

A series of discussions were held in Kabul in mid April 2016 with current and former politicians, local government experts, NGOs, civil society and the media/private sector¹. With the upcoming closure of the Sources of Tension in Afghanistan & Pakistan: A Regional Perspective policy research project in autumn 2016, the aim was to provide policymakers in Europe with the feedback and inputs from Kabul that will assist them to shape their policies towards Afghanistan, for the coming decade.

The discussions centred around three main questions, though equal weight was not always given to each by those interviewed.

- Expectations for addressing the sources of tension in Afghanistan that also have implications for the region (governance, socio-economic issues, ethnicity and sectarianism, conflict, militancy, radicalisation)
- Expectations from Europe, the West, and the five involved regional powers (Russia, China, Iran, India, Saudi Arabia)
- Whether and how events in 2015 have influenced these sets of expectations

Of the sources of tensions, sectarianism, militancy and radicalization were not topics that arose during the discussions. Ethnicity is rarely talked about by the Afghan political class at present, as part of what appears to be a calculated strategy, as it is seen to be benefiting the “enemies”, specifically Pakistan. These therefore did not arise during the many interviews held, despite the questions below forming the guidelines for discussions. Furthermore, the current climate in Kabul demonstrates a general trend of self-sufficiency, and therefore interlocutors had little to say about expectations from both the regional powers and the West. There was also a general perception that the international community has no other choice but to help the current state.

Despite a very challenging security situation at the time of the field visit, with the worst suicide bombing in Kabul in the past 15 years having taken place on April 19 2016, and despite the inevitable disruptions to the interviews schedule as a result of heightened security and a very tense situation in the city, interviews were conducted with a range informed/engaged interlocutors, a list of whose names appears at the end of this report. The project team

1. The project team met with approximately 40 people in the course of formal and informal discussions in Kabul in mid April 2016. Given the sensitivity of a number of the responses received, it has been decided that, although 15 were willing to have their names listed, their identities will be kept confidential for their protection. Those met included representatives of local and national NGOs, the media, the private sector, current and former politicians from the local and the national levels, civil servants, a former spokesperson for the Taliban on foreign affairs, and representatives of foundations.

was also fortunate in gaining unique access to several private gatherings of high-level government officials, civil society representatives, business leaders, active women and youth and an array of notable individuals and groups that are deeply invested and present in the Afghan polity and economy. The analysis presented in this report therefore has been informed both by private conversations with dozens of individuals and those who agreed to be formally interviewed. It is important to view this report in its broader context that is unfolding currently, but which is highly susceptible to changes due to both external and domestic pressures. Temporality thus is of the essence in understanding the analysis presented here.

The predominant themes discussed by those interviewed centered on governance-related issues, including the survival of the Afghan state, its economic and political viability, in particular the issues around adhering to the provisions of the Constitution, the performance of the National Unity Government, and the peace process. Interlocutors showed little interest in the activities of the regional powers, and commented on their expectations from the US and Europe, solely in the context of the – blithe – assumption that the West would simply continue underwriting the Afghans state economically. The Western preoccupation with the resurgence of the Taliban did not appear to be shared by Afghan interlocutors, either.

2. GOVERNANCE

State Survival

Afghanistan has not only had a new government in place for almost two years now, but it has also experienced the most difficult year from security perspective (2015) that also saw the Taliban overrun a major Afghan city (Kunduz) for the first time in 15 years.

At the start of the New Unity Government (NUG) in 2013, many were skeptical of the Afghan state's ability to weather a Taliban onslaught. Picking on this, President Ghani assigned to 2015 the title of "the year of survival of the Afghan state". And as the events of previous year unfolded, the Afghan state faced a real security threat in the form of the Taliban. Devoid of aerial power of the international forces, Afghan National Defence and Security Forces (ANDSF) suffered setbacks after setbacks on the battlefield but none as significant – at least symbolically – as the temporary collapse of the city of Kunduz in September 2015. It was the first time a major Afghan city changed hands after the fall of the Taliban rule. Taliban also started moving around in bigger groups, enabling them to launch frontal wars. As a consequence, a short termist, security-centric view of governance has unsurprisingly emerged.

The Taliban: Not an Existential Threat for the Afghan State?

Whilst increased Taliban activity has led to stronger calls for tougher action against the perpetrators. None the less, **the lifespan of the National Unity Government (NUG), the at times abrasive management style of President Ghani, the failure to hold parliamentary elections on time, the exodus of Afghan middle**

class and the economic slowdown were identified as key issues by those met. However, not all those interviewed necessarily shared President Ghani's thesis on the nature of the Taliban threat. Certainly they are seen as a potent threat to the newly-found freedoms, physical security or national progress, but the **Taliban are rarely seen as an existential threat to the state** by those in the country. Furthermore, the Taliban's failure to score major victories – barring a seven day capture of Kunduz city – appears to have further reinforced this view.

President Ghani, on the other hand, is seen by some as trying hard to highlight the importance of keeping the state intact as being a massive success for his government. The view has hardly gained traction amongst the elite of the country - who see the survival of the state as a given. They believe that the international community will never allow the current state to fall, and point to the continued, or in some cases renewed, support from the former as the evidence for their view.

Neighbours & State Survival

Stakeholders also look at the developments in the region optimistically. The burgeoning consensus in the region in favour of support to the current state – and efforts to integrate antagonistic actors in it – further decreases the importance of the survival of the Afghan state (as an issue) in the eyes of Afghan elite. Consequently, there is a clear disconnect between the official policy of the Afghan presidency itself and the rest of the polity.²

Afghanistan has historically been caught in the middle of complex and changing relations between its neighbours. This has posed a number challenges when defining the government's position and foreign policy ("*one can change its destiny but not its neighbours*", as one interlocutor pointed out).

Striking the right balance between the recent rapprochement with India and a constructive relationship with Pakistan was highlighted by some interlocutors as a difficult yet important challenge. A serious cost benefit analysis of a closer relationship with India and its effects on that with Pakistan ought to be conducted by the government and the political elites for the sake of stability both in the country and in the region (can the relationship with Pakistan be changed? If so, how does the relationship with India affect it? Does India have Afghanistan's best interest in mind? were some of the questions raised in that sense). Pakistan is overall perceived with great suspicion if not animosity as Islamabad is repeatedly described as a spoiler at many levels. However, beyond the realities of the past and present history between the two countries, some interlocutors pointed out that this is a perception that is partly based on a lack of real knowledge or relative misunderstanding about the root causes of the conflict, Pakistan's agenda and historical interests vis a vis its neighbours. This is in part due to the difficult communication between the two countries. Greater analysis and understanding about the root causes of the conflict and the role played by each actor was deemed to be a necessity to overcome the current situation (including the thorny and politically costly issue of the Durand line and the role of the ethnic component in it)

2. Interlocutors also pointed out that this was not the only example of failure in communication on the part of the NUG. Time and again, failure in communicating its policies and actions to public has come back to haunt the NUG. One consequence of this is the realisation by President Ghani of the extent of the problem, and he has subsequently tasked renowned human rights activist, Nader Nadery, to rectify this failure.

Although the internal political debate in Afghanistan has monopolized the discourse and diverted attention of the elites from discussions about the role of regional actors beyond Pakistan and India, China remains an actor whose actions are commented time and again in the context of different internal issues. Beijing's role in support of the State was repeatedly and consistently noted as important including within the framework of its recent efforts to both find a political solution to the conflict (through the Quadrilateral talks- although with increasing caution in order not to break the relationship with Pakistan) and the consolidation of a framework for economic sustainability of the region. It is unclear for many whether China is acting to help Afghanistan and/or its all-weathered ally Pakistan, or to further its own economic interests but there is no doubt - according to interlocutors - that China seeks and needs stability in Afghanistan -and by extension the region- to ensure prosperity and the success of initiatives such as the One Belt One Road.

Overall, the role of Afghanistan's neighbours is perceived as presenting both challenges and opportunities with the latter slightly outweighing the former. Water disputes with Iran (Hari Rud river) and Pakistan (Kabul River), were noted as growing flashpoints especially in the light of new dam projects in Afghanistan. This issue calls for close monitoring and action to avoid further deterioration and deeper conflict (between communities over their livelihoods and with the neighbouring countries over ownership rights and sustainable development). Afghanistan uses only a small portion (about 30 per cent) of the water that originates in the country and is currently aiming at improving its infrastructure through the construction of dams and water reservoirs (with India's help) in order to avoid the consequences of severe droughts. As noted by some interlocutors, Afghanistan's neighbours fear the construction of dam will lead to a substantial reduction of river flows downstream (up to 70%) which might have serious consequences for their economies. In that sense, a fully developed and stable Afghanistan is not in Pakistan and Iran's interest as noted by one interlocutor.

Perceptions on the Performance of the National Unity Government

The perceived level of discontent with the NUG is much higher than there ever was with the successive administrations led by President Karzai. While some of the setbacks may be said to be of NUG's own making, President Ghani and CEO Abdullah certainly fell prey to problems that were out of their control, in the view of many interlocutors. The decision of the international community to drawdown militarily and economically in an election year comes across as being seen as more and more misguided, if not nonsensical, in the view of some. The sudden increase in lack of economic opportunities blighted the NUG's performance from day one. Their cause was not helped by an extra-Constitutional arrangement that was seen as corrosive not only to the Afghan polity but also for ensuring good governance.

None the less, in the view of some interviewees, President Ghani and CEO Abdullah have forged a much stronger partnership than many had expected. (It is reported that there is a lot of frustration in President Karzai's camp over CEO Abdullah's benign attitude towards President Ghani). The main challenge within the current setup has come from

Vice President Dostum, who continues to request more powers and increasingly challenges President Ghani's authority. Some consider that it is President Ghani's management style itself that has slowed down progress. Interlocutors in Kabul were incensed by what was seen as his "micro-management". But none the less, the centralization of much of authority was not seen as having agitated CEO Abdullah, as much as it has for some of President Ghani's allies. It was pointed out that a good number have left his government already, including the heads of the Independent Directorate of Local Governance, and more recently the Minister of Mines. The President is said to deliver monologues on priorities and plans that, in the words of one interlocutor "literally have a day's life". Officials are reportedly frustrated by the fact that the President keeps changing his mind, which means they are "sitting on their hands doing nothing".

For some, President Ghani's frequent outbursts have not endeared him to his constituency either and on a number of occasions, have alienated and antagonized a number of groups. He is seen by some as has been gaffe-prone and his (low) popularity ratings may not only be down to taking over at a difficult time, but also his own stances. The comment was made that "*he is not taken as seriously as President Karzai was. The contest is not even close.*" His appointments were also questioned, and it was remarked that there is no shortage of corrupt and unqualified people in his team. Others considered that some of these accusations may be a little too harsh, as he has kept true to his promise of including more youth and women in the government. However, what is still questioned is who he has chosen from these groups. His ministers are accused of corruption and other forms of misuse. There are reports of a motion in the parliament for stripping some ministers of their portfolios. Among them are two young ministers, one of whom is assumed to have lied about his age at the time of his appointment³ and the other one about his abandoning his British citizenship⁴. President Ghani is already running important portfolios through acting heads. Further loss of permanent cabinet members will greatly undermine government's ability to function and his own personal credibility as well.

Equally damaging is that he is assumed by some to be more "American" than Afghan, in the way he is trying to govern the country. The presence of non-Afghan advisors in the presidential palace does not help his cause. Also he is perceived as spending much more of his time managing relations with Washington and other western capitals than with his government officials and local authorities. The local powerholders have reciprocated by challenging his authority, Balkh's Governor Atta and Kandahar's Police Chief, Abdul Raziq, being the prime culprits. Even those outside the government have created hurdles for him. President Karzai is said to be "furious" with him and reportedly wants his downfall - even if by unconstitutional means. Luckily for the NUG, there is not a consensus on the alternative to it among major players. According to interlocutors, some of the various positions include: calling for early elections; others believe a "*traditional Loya Jirga*" – not the one envisioned in the Constitution – should be convened; a third group is asking to have CEO Abdullah removed from his position and creating a more unified government; and some of NUG's opponents are calling for not derailing the constitutional order and allowing the government

3. The constitutional age for becoming a minister is 35 years. The minister in question is said to have been 33 years but reportedly forged an ID to make it 35.

4. Another constitutional requirement, unless waived by the parliament.

to complete its term. None the less, it appears that the NUG leadership is not paying heed to all these calls and believes it will survive as long as the international community is standing by them. However, all in all, many see President Ghani has having failed in co-opting local patronage networks, where President Karzai had prospered. What is certainly clear is that international financial and military support still plays a vital role in who calls the shots, despite assertions to the contrary by many Afghan leaders. And that could not have been more evident than in establishing and propping up the NUG.

Security: Muddling Through for Survival

The Afghan National Defence & Security Forces (ANSDF), despite being much maligned by international media, is regarded as muddling through, at worst, and managing the situation at best. The best indicator against which ANSDF can be judged is that the Kunduz invasion and capture has not – so far – been repeated. April and May 2016 have seen the ANSDF take the fight to Taliban – and even to Al Qaeda – killing scores of insurgents. Discussions with security officials, however, showed strikingly different perceptions of the strengths of their relative entities and highlighting inter-agency rivalries and capacities. According to many interlocutors, the police are no match for the National Directorate Security (NDS) and are reportedly squeamish about their capabilities. Officers from the latter clearly glow with confidence. The view was expressed that NDS officers believe that if it had not been for them, another Kunduz may have happened.

Predictions of gloom and doom proved far-fetched and the Afghan state not only survived the difficult year of 2015 but also enhanced its security capabilities. Against all the predictions of another damaging year for ANSDF in terms of casualties, those interviewed felt that 2016 may be a different year altogether, due to the ANSDF being better equipped and experienced to face the security threat, combined with an improvement in inter-agency coordination. None the less, it was considered that whilst enhanced airpower will have a decisive effect on the war theatre, however, if the Taliban manage to down a couple of the newly acquired airlift capacities, things could very quickly unravel for the nascent Afghan Air Force (AAF). Furthermore, the “*jihadi* conglomerate” elsewhere are providing by far the biggest opportunity for the Afghan state both to retain international support and to court the support of the emerging powers in the region – which has already begun happen to a certain extent.

3. THREATS TO THE POLITICAL VIABILITY OF THE STATE

The Constitutional Order: Inclusive Politics & Power Rotation

Two issues highlighted by interviewees were the question of implementation of the Constitution, and the elections.

In clear breach of the Constitution, the previous government as well as the NUG have failed on numerous occasions to implement its

prescriptions. A recent example cited is the inability – or unwillingness – of the NUG to hold the parliamentary elections on time. President Ghani has (unconstitutionally) extended the term of the sitting parliament. A few parliamentarians have already tendered their resignations, citing the unconstitutionality of the current parliament to continue. It was in fact the lack of constitutionality which was a major source of concern for most of our interlocutors in relation to the governance and state survival spheres. The fear is that the rules of the game set at the outset of post-Taliban era may have become over-strained. This is a big concern, particularly for those who are currently out of power (as an indirect means for conflict resolution).. Currently, the post-Taliban arrangement allows for a much more inclusive form of politics and rotation of power. Should this fall apart, the logic for the current state to continue will cease to exist.⁵

The literature on electoral democracies concludes that two successful, uncontested elections in new democracies is an indicator of successful transitions from either conflict or dictatorship. In reality, every single election in post-2001 Afghanistan has been contested, the last taking the country to the brink of state failure. The NUG's failure to conduct parliamentary and district council elections and subsequently holding a constitutional *Jirga* within two years of its formation, as agreed by the rivals of the 2014 contested elections, has created an environment of ongoing uncertainty. The de facto extension of the life of the NUG for a full five-year term following Secretary John Kerry's trip to Kabul on April 9 2016 was condemned in some quarters and rather quietly welcomed in others, according to interlocutors. Kerry's justification of the five year term of the NUG during a press conference – a question handled by Kerry himself, rather than being handed over to President Ghani for a response - invoked anger among some political actors. It was also detrimental to the image of the Afghan state as a whole, reinforcing the Taliban's claim about the Kabul administration's being a US puppet.

It is clear that partial – or in some cases lack of – implementation of the Constitution in both spirit and word has given birth to problems such as the term length of NUG. As one interlocutor put it, "*the international community is too fast in intervening in our political disputes*". This has not only resulted in mistakes being made, but also not allowing Afghan conflict resolution mechanisms to be tested and refined accordingly.

It was considered likely to be impossible to hold the long-overdue parliamentary elections in 2016 as scheduled, with the first quarter of 2017 as the most realistic timeline. However, some believed the short term feasibility of the exercise depends on the management of expectations and would therefore come down to two options: a clean, perfect election, which in the current context would be impossible by October 2016 or an imperfect but widely accepted electoral process, which could be made possible within the announced timeframe. Whatever the date of the next round of elections, tackling the issue of voter registration as well as the role of the Independent Electoral Commission -including its decentralization which would allow a much needed local management of disputes- were highlighted as essential pending issues. Additionally, interlocutors believed that had it not been for the US's European allies and some internal sources of pressure, the US would have no problem with forgoing holding elections on a

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couple of occasions.⁶ (Indeed, President Karzai is on record as saying that American officials told him they would not have a problem if he continued to be the president unconstitutionally as long as he signed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US.) Interlocutors commented that accusations have also surfaced that Americans were not in favor of holding Afghanistan's first presidential election in 2004 and wanted President Karzai to continue unconstitutionally.

On the other hand, while ex-President Karzai had a proven track record of supporting a relatively higher degree of freedom of speech, in contrast, the NUG's early actions were seen as indicating backtracking. After some protests from civil society, this was more pro-actively addressed by the NUG. For some, Nadery's appointment is seen as a pivotal move. He will, however, be challenged by circles within the government that advocate less transparency in the name of serving the national security aims. For instance, interviewees noted that there has been an unannounced directive to the spokespersons of all ministries and departments no to disclose the real numbers of ANDSF casualties.

Nonetheless, unconstitutional moves have proven costly but not sufficiently so as to derail the Afghan state - yet. But according to some, this may not be the case in the future.

Lack of Constitutional Clarity & the Democratic Process

In the past, local overlords such as Atta Mohammad Noor and Abdul Rashid Dostum were seen as impeding the democratic process. Now, the central authority is seen as equally complacent. Lack of constitutional clarity drives much of the tension between President Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah and the latter and Ghani's vice presidents, advisors and aides. For the time being, the politics of consensus have prevailed. As long as there has existed broad political agreement on certain issues even if unconstitutional – such as holding elections on time – the governments of Karzai and Ghani have turned a blind eye to the Constitution. However, the picture is unclear on what will happen if political consent is withdrawn by certain powerful quarters, and how political disputes would be solved without a robust legal basis.

Constitutional Negligence & the Taliban's Return

The perceived progressive negligence on the Constitution, the existence of an unrealistic and complex mechanism of constitutional reform and the lack of a truly powerful entity for oversight of implementation of the Constitution have, in the view of some, gradually undermined the viability of the current form of politics – in effect, thus undermining the democratic Afghan state. This is regarded as dangerous, as it opens the way for a variety of undemocratic practices. For instance, it was considered likely that the Taliban will take the option of accepting elections but only if the list of the candidates - and even those allowed to vote - are vetted by a religious authority of their choice. It would appear from informed sources, that the Taliban have currently given up on the idea of ruling or dominating the entire country, but instead are increasingly looking to court a few provinces where writ of the central

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government is be close to non-existent, to establish themselves there. As one interlocutor put it, they want a *de facto* “Lebanonization of Afghanistan”, further noting that “the concept of Afghanistan is facing a serious challenge for the first time since its creation”.

It was clear from interviews that, in relation to the question of state survival, a direct link is made to the failure of both successive governments and the international community to forge an acceptable form of political system in the first place and what was seen by some as the gross negligence in making the Constitution more and more irrelevant. Indeed, it was this, rather than the implosion of the state at the hands of non-state violent groups, that interlocutors saw as the main issue regarding the survival of the Afghan state. Once again, the NUG’s communication failures were noted, in the failure to adequately explain to the public, their inability, unwillingness (or a combination of both in observing the Constitution).

4. SUSTAINING THE ECONOMIC VIABILITY OF THE AFGHAN STATE

Subsidizing the Afghan State

The heavy dependence of the Afghan state on foreign aid was singled out as raising further serious questions about its sustainability. The fact that, according to some interlocutors, the elites have been obsessed by politics in the past years, leaving the issue of economics almost untouched, has not help the much needed search for alternatives that would ensure the economic survival of the State. It was pointed out that Afghan states have collapsed in the past once their foreign patrons have stopped paying them. Being landlocked and without a genuinely promising source of revenue that could be exploited in the short term, the only realistic option to sustain the current Afghan state is seen as being through foreign assistance.

Historically, Afghan rulers, particularly Ahmad Shah Abdali, constituted a constellation of fiefdoms whose revenues to their kingdoms was of prime interest for the rulers rather than exerting full sovereignty over them: The number of these fiefdoms shrunk drastically once imperial western forces started competing with each other for the control of the lucrative regions once in the grip of Afghans. The British compensated for the Afghan rulers’ loss until their withdrawal from the region in 1947. From there onward, Afghanistan increasingly looked to the pro and anti-communist blocs for subsidizing its state. The drive was one of the reasons for fragmentation of the Afghan state in 1970s. In terms of state revenue, little has changed since.

Aid Dependency

The current Afghan state will have no chance of surviving economically should the US and its allies decide to stop funding it altogether, despite the promises of mineral and other natural resources revenue. Those interviewed consider that part of the reason why the Russians are

tolerating the Americans in Afghanistan is the financial contribution of the latter that will be hard to match. In the past, President Karzai's government had little to no plans for generating domestic revenues, working from the premise that a peace agreement will be struck with the Taliban, thus considerably reducing expenses of the state due to a decline in money being spent on the war. President Ghani, on the other hand, championed the idea of exploiting the Afghan minerals before coming to power. On assuming power, reportedly he realized the plan would take much longer than previously assumed to materialize. Therefore, he turned his attention to the transmission lines and traffic of cargo that will cross Afghanistan, through reviving the old Silk Road. However, the biggest impediments to this plan were seen as Pakistan's unwillingness to have either Afghanistan or India to forge such a regional connectivity on the one hand, and the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, on the other.

Economic Viability Not Seen as a Problem

Notably however, the issue of the economic survival of the Afghan state was not given as a top priority among the Kabul political elite with whom the project team met. The prevalent assumption – realistic or otherwise - is that "*Afghanistan cannot fail*". And that should this happen, "*another 9/11 could be on the cards*". Certainly, the region would also suffer immensely from the fallout.

Those interviewed seemed little concerned by the question of the rationalization of the economy in the wake of dwindling international support. However the lack of revenue generation capacities in the short term, unemployment, especially youth, and its links with security and migration were repeatedly mentioned even if briefly. The NUG's very limited success in tackling these challenges -see the case of the jobs for peace programme, the limited funding available for some initiatives, the mismatch between the latter and the expectations and unrealistic promises of the government, and the still great economic management problems of the administration such as centralized procurement procedures- were also mentioned. Overall, concerns were mainly micro and link to short term realities rather than strategic, in depth and on the long term, confirming therefore the limited importance given by interlocutors to the issue of economics in the light of decreasing international assistance.

As highlighted during the conversations held, Afghanistan has no choice but to be heavily dependent on the international community for the next couple of decades – assuming this assistance is indeed forthcoming. There is no real local alternative revenue source, given the loss of these over the past two centuries (Kashmir, Peshawar, Delhi and access to sea). Rumors were reported that the patience of the international community is wearing thin as far as that NUG has been given six months to put its house in order, especially when it comes to corruption. Disconcertingly, not a single response was obtained from any policy interlocutor, putting forward clear options to tackle the problem.

5. THE PEACE PROCESS

Interviewees focused primarily on President Ghani's overtures to Pakistan – as well as to the Taliban. While suspicions of motives of the Pakistani authorities ran deep in the Kabul circles even before President Ghani agreed to make some concessions, Pakistan's failure to deliver on its promise of bringing the Taliban to the negotiating table is seen as having further strengthened the view that Pakistan can never be a friend of Afghanistan. The strong feeling was expressed that, without Pakistan's help, the Taliban would not last long. In this regard, some considered that Pakistan may have overestimated its influence over the Taliban or else, has deliberately decided against putting pressure on the latter. Notwithstanding, the overriding perception in Kabul is that Pakistan has undisputed influence over the Taliban, and that it considers a weak Afghanistan in its best interest. This view is regarded as having cost President Ghani immense political capital because of what is widely seen as a policy of appeasement towards Pakistan. Surprisingly though, there was a strong sense that Pakistan and Afghanistan need to put an end to "*undeclared hostilities*" against each other, as President Ghani puts it. Members of the Kabul political elite were also surprisingly candid about the covert activities of past Afghan governments in Pakistan. The importance of the Durand Line was also highlighted frequently. Although views pertaining to the latter differ, there seems to be an overall consensus that the issue should be resolved, over a period of time.

The Taliban

Perhaps surprisingly, the Taliban did not feature prominently in interviewees' comments, in relation to the peace talks, despite the fact that it is one of the two most important parties to the conflict. Almost everyone met thought it would be acceptable to reconcile with the Taliban, as long as they agree to accept Afghanistan's Constitution. (Once again, constitutional adherence took priority.) It was widely believed by those interviewed that "*the Taliban did not possess any real power*"; and that "*they will ultimately have to listen to their Pakistani patrons*". But as one interlocutor pointed out, there seems to be indications that the Taliban office in Qatar as well as other leaders beyond the latter do not wish Pakistan to be the voice or the representative of the movement in the negotiations with the Afghan government.

7. The interviews preceded the appointment of Mullah Haibatullah Akhundzada as new leader of the Afghan Taliban, following death of Mullah Akhtar Mansoor, who was killed in a drone strike in late May 2016.

8. As is evident from the executions of six Taliban prisoners on 8 May 2016 after the STAP RP team visit. This policy has reportedly even invited the wrath of President Karzai, who was routinely accused during his time in office of being soft on Taliban.

There was little concern about how Mullah Omar's death has affected the Taliban and whether or not their fragmentation has either positive or negative effect on peace talks.⁷ The Taliban, on the other hand, are seen as possibly having overplayed their card of strengthening their position militarily, before entering the peace talks (for which there seems to be some appetite). The view was expressed that President Ghani seems adamant to wage a full-scale war against the insurgents, employing much more radical methods.⁸

The NUG has officially distanced itself from all the channels of communication pertaining to the peace talks. Its leadership is still pondering withdrawing altogether from the Quadrilateral Coordination

Group (QCG) mechanism. As of the time of the interviews in mid-April 2016, the NUG had yet to agree to attend the next meeting in Islamabad. Interlocutors remarked that Afghanistan has already conveyed its dismay to the US and China about Pakistan's failure to deliver on its promises; and that to restore trust and reopen channels of communication will require a painstaking effort now, given the fact that President Ghani – already embattled on so many other fronts – may not be willing a risk by committing to a deeply unpopular agenda.

Additional Comments

Many interlocutors coincide on the idea that the Afghan State, and the state building project are facing one of their most challenging periods as the country and the NUG deal with a triple transition (economic, security and political) in a context of growing western disengagement. Despite the many concerns heard during the interviews, there was an almost unanimous consensus about the importance and the need to guarantee the survival of the state (in stark contrast with the stance of many in the 80ies who sought the destruction of the state) and a absolute lack of interest in going back to a situation of open conflict and war. However, short term thinking focused on the internal political situation in the country seems to have distracted the elites from broader, regional and strategic thinking essential in the search for sustainable solutions for the country (and by extension, for the region). Little was mentioned about the expectations vis à vis the forthcoming summits in Warsaw (NATO) and Brussels which will undoubtedly determine the future of international engagement in the remaining of the decade of transformation.

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