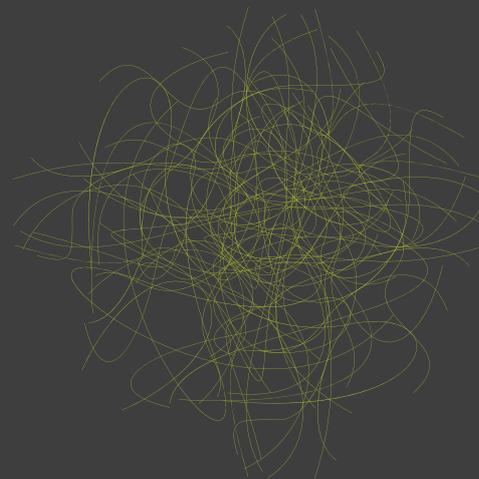


**Sources of Tension  
in Afghanistan and  
Pakistan: A Regional  
Perspective**

**Afghanistan:  
Overview of  
Sources of  
Tension with  
Regional  
Implications  
2015**

**Malaiz Daud**

January 2016



CIDOB Policy Research Project

**CIDOB**

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# AFGHANISTAN: OVERVIEW OF SOURCES OF TENSION WITH REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS 2015

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## Introduction

2015 was an eventful year for Afghanistan, especially for its new government. The National Unity Government (NUG) of President Ashraf Ghani and CEO Abdullah Abdullah had a difficult year domestically but did relatively well at the regional and international level. Increase in insurgent activity and human capital outflow were by far the biggest challenges the new government faced. However, the government managed to secure further international military and financial commitments in the face of new challenges. President Ghani's most ferocious move on the foreign policy front was his rapprochement with Pakistan in an effort to force the Taliban to open negotiations with NUG. This put a temporary strain on Kabul's relationship with Delhi.

Of the five regional powers (China, Russia, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia) covered in this report, there was a clear shift in China's policy Afghanistan policy from a bystander to the main interlocutor between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

Moreover, Russia's reported meetings with Taliban on the highest level came as a huge surprise to everyone. The rise of the so called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in Afghanistan has clearly worried the Russians, so they are looking to Taliban, amongst others, to fend off the ISIS. In contrast, Iran and Saudi Arabia's policies vis-a-vis Kabul did not see a dramatic change. Iran's nuclear deal could be good news for Afghanistan in economic terms, especially now that the international sanctions against Iran have been lifted (January 2016).

## 1. Governance

### 1.1. President Ghani's Five-Circle Foreign Policy

Afghanistan's former president, Hamid Karzai, used to emphasize the importance of an "independent and balanced" foreign policy, in which the countries of the region were assigned an important position. In a

recent interview (January 6, 2016) with BBC Persian, Karzai once again emphasized the significance of his success in foreign policy sphere by establishing cordial relations with countries such as Russia, China, Saudi Arabia and Iran. He also highlighted the importance of not taking sides in the US-Iran tensions. However, it should also be noted that his government's success in having established friendly relations with regional powers was also due to convergence of interests of almost all countries, near and far, in Afghanistan, particularly when it comes to global threat of terrorism. Therefore, President Ghani may have inherited a number of problems domestically – in addition to notable achievements – from President Karzai but he has certainly inherited foreign relations in a healthy state, with the exception of relations with Pakistan.

Subsequently, President Ghani has further emphasized the importance of the region by putting all the powers in question – except Saudi Arabia – in the tier one of his five-circle foreign policy. It must be noted that Ghani bestowed a more nuanced explanation to the de facto foreign policy of Afghanistan at the time of his taking the office. The five circles of Ghani's foreign policy objectives are: (i) the neighboring countries, (ii) Islamic countries, (iii) the West, (iv) Asia and (v) international organizations. Initially, President Ghani's "neighboring countries" definition did not include countries that did not share a boundary with Afghanistan, but that soon changed as it raised some eyebrows in India, and possibly Russia, resulting in a U-turn by Ghani to modify the "neighbors"<sup>1</sup> into "neighborhood"<sup>2</sup> to include countries with significant clout and importance for Afghanistan, such as India. This shift was also informed by the events in the region. As soon as President Ghani realized Pakistan's desire or capacity to induce a quick pause to Taliban-perpetrated violence appeared limited, he reoriented his policy towards India, restoring some of the suspended agreements with Delhi, previously reached with the government of President Karzai.

President Ghani believes that since geography cannot change, Afghanistan must find a way to get along with its neighbors by transforming the geography through a political economy that promises stability and peace for Afghanistan, not war. Secondly, Ghani's rationale for looking to the Islamic world is based on shared faith, history and culture and because events in the Islamic world affect Afghanistan and vice versa. He sees Afghanistan's relations with the West transforming from military-centric to those based on creating *"the platform for enduring economic, political and cultural relations with the circles and our first point of intersection between the first and the third is how Afghanistan will become a model of cooperation between China and the United States and the rest of NATO-ISAF"*. The fourth circle is part of the medium to long-term objectives of the National Unity Government of Afghanistan (NUG) because Ghani believes East Asia has already ended what he terms "its long war" and the violence in the West Asia will end in the next two decades, paving the way for an Asian Continental economy, at the heart of which will be China and India. The fifth circle is deemed important because international organizations, corporations, nongovernmental organizations and global networks are influential and affect the works of governments –no less that of Afghanistan.

Analyzing how the NUG has fared so far, initially, there were many concerns that NUG will find itself dealing with meagre resources in the wake of drawdown of the international military forces. Most analysts urged for a "condition-based" drawdown to avoid creating too large a vacuum.

1. <http://president.gov.af/en/news/transcript-of-statement-by-president-ashraf-ghani-at-china-institute-of-international-studies-ciis>
2. <http://www.gatewayhouse.in/ghani-and-india-circles-of-separation/>

Fortunately for President Ghani, the US and its NATO allies not only altered their withdrawal plans and timetables, but have even recently reengaged in combatting the Taliban, thanks to Ghani's ability to establish much closer relations with the US/NATO than his predecessor. This has given President Ghani's government a crucial breathing space.

At the regional level, NUG found itself in a good position. While most of the countries in the region have steadfastly backed stability in Afghanistan in the past decade, China's emergence as a key interlocutor between Afghanistan and Pakistan has raised hopes for ending hostilities between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Saudi Arabia has also given a much stronger backing to the new administration in Kabul than many had assumed, partly because Ghani's electoral victory was understood by some as a victory for a pro-Saudi party against a pro-Iranian party. Ghani has also stopped the practice of receiving funds for the president's office from Iran. He even issued a statement to support Saudi's action against the Houthis in Yemen, something Saudi's close ally Pakistan stopped short of doing.

Additionally, Ghani chose to make Saudi Arabia the destination of his first trip abroad as the President. That was followed soon after by a trip to China and Pakistan, much to the ire of India, where he traveled seven months after being sworn in as the president. President Ghani's decision to snub India for China was informed by what he terms an effort to cease the "*undeclared hostilities*" between Pakistan and Afghanistan. In order to put an end to the latter, Ghani was well aware that China and Saudi Arabia could play a key role as the main regional patrons of the Pakistani state. It is worth mentioning that Ghani, like his predecessor, believes that without ending the war, Afghanistan will never be able to "*realize self-reliance*" as the war not only costs lives but also drains the state coffers. Therefore, he has set about to find a way to solve Afghanistan's problems with Pakistan, including the contentious Durand line, noting that one cannot deal with a 21<sup>st</sup> century problem by offering a 19<sup>th</sup> century solution.

All in all, while Ghani has struggled domestically, he has done reasonably well on the foreign policy front. His overture to Pakistan to get the Taliban to the negotiating table has already paid some dividends, though it has yet to produce concrete results. Despite the fact that China had already become more involved in Afghanistan, Ghani has managed to make their involvement in the peace process count. He has also ironed out wrinkles with India, though the latter still remains suspicious or at best unconvinced of his motives. Perhaps President Ghani's biggest achievement in 2015 by far was to get the US and its allies to recommit more resources to mission Resolute Support.

## 2. Socio-Economic issues

### 2.1. The Refugee Crisis

2015 saw thousands of Afghans arrive in Europe. According to Eurostat statistics for the third quarter of 2015, Afghans constituted the second largest group of asylum-seekers, after Syrians. 56,700 applications for asylum were lodged by Afghans, six times more than in the same period in 2014<sup>3</sup>. This has hit countries which have spent billions of dol-

3. See the report here: [http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum\\_quarterly\\_report](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Asylum_quarterly_report)

lars in assistance in the past 15 years in Afghanistan hard. Germany's politicians have faced a barrage of questions about why Afghans are leaving their country despite the investment in blood and treasure by a number of European countries. Germany's initial reaction was to start a dialogue with the Afghan government on how to repatriate the majority of Afghans since it was believed that Afghans were mere "economic migrants"<sup>4</sup>. The Afghan government responded by sending Afghanistan's first lady to Germany to plead the German authorities for clemency. President Ghani subsequently urged Afghans not to abandon their country, but found himself in hot water when, he was reminded that his and the families of most of his senior colleagues still lived abroad.<sup>5</sup>

There is much speculation as to why Afghans are leaving their country. Some argue that most of Afghans flocking to Europe are those who have lived for decades in Iran. However, statistics show an increase by many folds in requests for passports in Kabul, with thousands applying daily. However, the root causes of the phenomenon are still unclear.<sup>6</sup>

### 3. Ethnicity and Sectarianism

#### 3.1. Targeting of Shi'a Communities

On November 10, thousands of people took to the streets of Kabul to protest the killing of seven civilians who belonged to the Hazara ethnic group (who are predominantly Shi'a). While violence against Shi'as in Pakistan continues, in Afghanistan in contrast, there have been fewer attacks against them. Most of these attacks were attributed to external groups.

None the less, despite efforts by the Afghan government and the Taliban, there have still been incidents of kidnappings and killings of Hazaras, mainly in the province of Zabul. The Afghan government and Taliban have conducted separate operations against the perpetrators of violence against Shi'as. The Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) has been blamed for some of these attacks. It is believed some of the anti-Shi'a terrorist organizations that were operating out of tribal areas of Pakistan have crossed the Durand Line into Afghanistan in the wake of *Zarb-e-Azb* operation by the Pakistani army in the North Waziristan. However in spite of these attacks, Afghanistan remains unaffected by the regional Sunni-Shi'a showdown (which has been intensified by the conflicts in Syria and Iraq).

### 4. Insurgency

#### 4.1. Efforts to End Undeclared Hostilities with Pakistan – Ghani's Peace Overtures

Although Pakistan's support to Taliban had been well-documented, its officials always denied Taliban leadership was present in Pakistan, regardless of several arrests of high level Taliban leaders by the Pakistani security agencies. During his period in office, President Karzai traveled to

4. See here: <http://www.politico.eu/article/germany-afghan-migration-asylum-refugees-syria/>

5. See here: <http://www.dw.com/en/ashraf-ghani-this-is-part-of-our-shame/a-18894203>

6. An upcoming CIDOB-STAP paper is going to explore the question of why Afghans are leaving their country.

Pakistan twenty one times to get Pakistan to bring Taliban to the negotiating table, without success. All international pressure failed as well. In the process, Karzai's stance also hardened, which resulted in disregard for Pakistan's interests in Afghanistan. This changed after Ghani came to power and Pakistan's Chief of Army Staff, General Raheel Sharif, reiterated Pakistan's a list of demands that Pakistani has long persisted on in exchange for assisting in the Afghan peace process. Furthermore, the Peshawar Army Public School's massacre of December 16, 2014 increased the urgency on part of the Pakistani army, which faced strong domestic pressure, to take action against the Pakistani Taliban.

President Ghani used this opportunity to table his demand to General Sharif to exact the same treatment to both Afghan and Pakistani Taliban. In return, Ghani ordered the arrest of perpetrators and facilitators of the Peshawar school massacre, sent ten Afghan cadets to Pakistani military educational institutions and agreed to a cooperation agreement between the intelligence agencies of the two countries. In the immediate aftermath of Ghani's rapprochement, several Track II meetings between the representatives of the Afghan government and Taliban took place in China, Qatar and Norway amongst others, but no direct formal talks between the two sides took place within the two-month timeframe envisioned by Ghani. Finally, on July 7, 2015, the first round of direct talks took place in Murree, Pakistan, in the presence of Chinese and American representatives. None the less, soon after, the Taliban's official website denied sanctioning the talks before taking off the press release a few hours later. There was also contestation by several Taliban factions and individual members whether or not the talks had been authorized by Mullah Omar. As the wrangling within Taliban continued, Ghani urged Pakistan to get Mullah Omar release a statement in favor of the talks. As a result, Mullah Omar's Eid message highlighted his support of the talks. As the pressure increased, Islamabad informed Ghani of Mullah Omar's death in 2013, leaked to the public simultaneously by the Afghan intelligence agency, the National Directorate for Security (NDS).

This event ended hopes for next rounds of talks, as an episode of contention within the Taliban movement began to unfold. There were at least two breakaway groups that denounced the process by which the new leader, Taliban's de facto leader Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, was appointed as the new leader. At least, one faction chose a rival leader. However, Mullah Mansour's group is assumed to be still the strongest one and has since targeted rivals in a series of operations. In order to stamp his authority on the movement, Mullah Mansour also intensified attacks against the Afghan government. Several major incidents took place in Kabul within a few days in August of 2015<sup>7</sup>, which prompted President Ghani to pause the ongoing process and reach out again to Delhi.

At the same time, the Taliban's attacks intensified in several provinces. Afghanistan's First Vice President, General Rashid Dostum, personally oversaw operations against the Taliban in several Northern provinces. However, soon the strategic province of Kunduz in the northeast fell – briefly – to the Taliban. Having already expended a great deal of his political capital on the attempts at rapprochement to Pakistan, the situation on the ground made it extremely difficult for Ghani to jus-

7. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/08/world/asia/suicide-truck-bombing-in-kabul-afghanistan.html>

tify his position, and he succumbed to domestic pressure, as a result. However, diplomatic efforts to restart the talks on the regional and international level continued despite the domestic situation.

The new phase of peace process may not have achieved the desired results but it has had some unintended consequences. Mullah Omar's death was finally confirmed, partly because President Ghani pressed for public backing from the late Taliban supreme leader for the peace process so the Pakistani government had to make the revelation. Pakistani officials publically acknowledged links to the Taliban, which may have come as unwelcome to the latter due to the implied connection with elements of the Pakistan army. Most importantly, the Afghan government's position for continued support to the ANSF in order to fight against the Taliban has been further strengthened. Ghani can now show to Western allies that he went the extra mile to accede to Pakistan's demands, without concrete outcomes, thus justifying Afghanistan's strategic partnership with India.

#### **4.2. The Fall of Kunduz**

The adoption of conventional war tactics by Taliban to expand territorial control especially in the absence of NATO/ISAF air support was commented on in the Overview Report of 2014. Late 2015 saw several districts in the strategic province of Helmand in the south attacked by large groups of Taliban. Furthermore, the Taliban reportedly already control large swaths of territory in Helmand.

Kunduz, which fell to the Taliban on September 28, 2015, has historically been a very difficult province to rule, due to its ethnic heterogeneity, which makes it extremely complicated, where different ethnic groups vie for influence. It was the first major city to fall after the withdrawal of the Soviet forces from Afghanistan in 1989 and the last place to fall in the north when Taliban were driven out in 2001. The fall of Kunduz came as a surprise to many, despite the fact that the collapse was brewing for months, or even years, according to some reports. Although Taliban retained control of the provincial center only briefly, there were still many unanswered questions. How did the local police fail to trace the advances of the Taliban before taking the center? Why was nothing done when there were clearly some warning signs? Why were the governor and several other officials not in the province at the time of its capture? One dominant theory is that since President Ghani has stopped subsidies to local overlords – a routine practice under President Karzai – it has resulted in disruption of the local patronage network. Others, including the official investigation report, contend that the presence of local patronage networks was the main cause of the collapse. Although the report has not been made public, the heads of the investigating commission reportedly believe that the presence of what they term “grey forces” induced the collapse of Kunduz – meaning criminal networks that are deeply entrenched in the government machinery at the local level, and whose loyalty keeps shifting. One of the main recommendations of the report was to create three more administrative units in the province. The initiative was subsequently announced by the President right after the province was freed from the Taliban.

### 4.3. The Rise of ISIS in Afghanistan

According to President Vladimir Putin, ISIS is present in 25 out of 34 provinces of Afghanistan; and the US commander in Afghanistan says ISIS is now “operationally emergent”, recently authorizing attacks against it there. The picture is however muddy. While there are certainly groups that have aligned themselves with ISIS, either because of greater resources or rewards, or due to disenfranchisement from the Pakistani and Afghan Taliban, ISIS’s ability to challenge the Taliban’s dominance will rest on a number of factors, from courting the already existing insurgent and criminal groups, to finding a safe space for command and control purposes (e.g. Pakistan), to controlling sources of revenue (i.e. drug trafficking routes) and so on and so forth.

Most of ISIS-affiliated groups at present in Afghanistan reportedly consist of disgruntled Pakistani and Afghan Taliban. Both the Afghan government and Afghan Taliban have already conducted expansive operations against the ISIS members. Since emergence of the ISIS in Afghanistan, hundreds of its members have been killed in separate ANSF and Taliban attacks.

## 5. The Regional Powers

### 5.1. China

8. See here how China’s policy towards Afghanistan is informed by the rise of ETIM: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366513000286>
9. More detail here: <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13270-beijing-waivers-on-afghanistan-security-commitment.html>
10. Also see how low-key China’s involvement in Afghanistan was prior to 2014 here: [http://csis.org/files/publication/120322\\_Zhao\\_ChinaAfghan\\_web.pdf](http://csis.org/files/publication/120322_Zhao_ChinaAfghan_web.pdf)
11. We have covered China’s contacts with Taliban in our previous reports. However, there are also other reports like this one: <http://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinas-foreign-policy-afghanistan>
12. See the statement here: <http://mfa.gov.af/en/news/joint-press-release-the-second-meeting-of-the-quadrilateral-coordination-group-qcg-of-afghanistan-pakistan-the-united-states-and-china>
13. An episode of contention has unfolded in Pakistan over the change of route from the western Pashtun and Baluch populated provinces, to the east, primarily through Punjab and Sindh, which if not managed properly may threaten the CPEC.

There were already indications in recent years that China was fundamentally changing its policy towards Afghanistan, a stance welcomed by the USA who had long urged Beijing to play a much more active role there, including to partially fill the void left by the withdrawal of international troops. However the deciding factor for China may well have been the threat of East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)<sup>8</sup>. To blunt the threat, China has coupled its domestic development schemes with working together with Pakistan and Afghanistan on a regional platform<sup>9</sup> to curtail Islamic extremism<sup>10</sup>.

China is in a position to play a key role in the peace process of Afghanistan because of its relationship with Pakistan.<sup>11</sup> China has already facilitated two Track II meetings on its soil and there were Chinese emissaries in the first direct talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban in Murree on July 7, 2015. Most importantly, China is one of the parties of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group (QCG), along with Afghanistan, Pakistan and the US, which has already held two meetings on January 11 and 18, 2016 in Islamabad and Kabul respectively<sup>12</sup>. China has also been part of multiple bilateral, trilateral and multilateral meetings on Afghanistan with Pakistan, India, Russia and the US.

China’s direct involvement in talks together with the ISIS alert and the international community’s continued commitment to Afghanistan present a real opportunity for peace. Peace in Afghanistan would also have an effect on the planned China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), should the western route get the go ahead<sup>13</sup>. With this in mind, one wonders what China’s plans are for its stalled economic projects in Afghanistan such as Mes Aynak. What is certain is that China’s planned investments

both in Pakistan and Central Asia<sup>14</sup> could be affected should war keep raging in Afghanistan. Also, with the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) and Chabahar Port projects taking off, the integration of Afghanistan in the regional economic and energy sector is a real prospect, of which China must be well aware. This could be the reason why China has already greatly increased its assistance to Afghanistan and has strengthened its diplomatic links on multiple levels<sup>15</sup>.

## 5.2 Russia

Russia has kept a consistent nonbelligerent policy towards the US and its allies' role in Afghanistan<sup>16</sup>. Russia's bombing campaign in Syria may have further widened the gap between Russia, regional powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia and the US and EU. This situation has created a new dynamic in Afghanistan-Russian relations, with reports emerging of President Vladimir Putin's alleged meeting with the Taliban's leader in December 2015 in Dushanbe.<sup>17</sup> Unnamed Taliban members are reported in media as having asserted that Putin promised financial resources, training and modern military hardware to the Taliban in the fight against ISIS in Afghanistan. The reports have, however, been denied by both the Taliban and by Russian officials. Nonetheless, Russia's special envoy to Afghanistan said in October 2015 that his government's interests "objectively coincide" with those of the Taliban and that there are channels of communication between them,<sup>18</sup> reported by a credible source as having been established some two years ago<sup>19</sup>.

Moreover, Russia's decision to ally with the Taliban could have been influenced by the pledging of allegiance to ISIS by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in the wake of the death of Mullah Omar (the group was formerly allied to the latter). Before this, Russia had always seen the Taliban as the potential source of support to the extremist groups in Central Asia, thus imposing sanctions on the group. In response to Kunduz's fall, Russia deployed attack and transport helicopters to a base in Tajikistan to rebuff any imminent threats, as support for claims by the Tajikistan president that there is insecurity along 60 percent of his country's border with Afghanistan<sup>20</sup>.

Meetings between Afghan and Russian officials and Russian and Western officials<sup>21</sup> on Afghanistan continued throughout 2015. Interestingly, Afghanistan's National Security Council probably had the highest number of meetings with Russian officials. President Ghani also traveled to Russia to attend the SCO summit in July 2015 and met President Putin on the sidelines. The meeting was followed by a visit by Afghanistan's first vice president to Moscow in October of 2015. However, the visit which got more press was that of Afghanistan's former president, Hamid Karzai, in June of 2015. Karzai claimed during the visit that relations between the two countries were "blossoming"<sup>22</sup>.

## 5.3 India

In terms of Indian investments in Afghanistan, the Indian-funded Salma dam in the western province of Herat was finally completed in 2015, in spite of security threats and attempts to disrupt the project. The jubilation

14. More on China's investments in Central Asia here: <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1879366513000286>

15. For detailed reports on China-Afghanistan interactions, please see our reports from 2013 and 2014 here: [http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/stap\\_rp/policy\\_research\\_papers/afghanistan\\_the\\_regional\\_powers\\_an\\_overview\\_of\\_2013](http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/afghanistan_the_regional_powers_an_overview_of_2013) and [http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication\\_series/stap\\_rp/policy\\_research\\_papers/afghanistan\\_overview\\_of\\_sources\\_of\\_tension\\_with\\_regional\\_implications\\_2014/\(language\)/eng-US](http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/publication_series/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/afghanistan_overview_of_sources_of_tension_with_regional_implications_2014/(language)/eng-US). For a summary of recent high-level visits by Chinese officials and figures on increase in aid, there are some facts here: <http://carnegie-mec.org/2015/03/08/what-is-behind-china-s-growing-attention-to-afghanistan>

16. See a good account of how Russia is wary of the US presence in Afghanistan but still wants the US to be present in Afghanistan: <http://as.ucpress.edu/content/55/2/398>. Also see examples of cooperation and intelligence sharing here: <http://www.interfax.com/newsinf.asp?id=492026> and <http://www2.ewi.info/events/6th-meeting-joint-us-russia-working-group-afghan-narcottrafficking>

17. See here: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/world/the-times/taliban-leader-gains-vladimir-putins-help-at-secret-meeting/news-story/c212a1f20b685fae034c63ea7b0cdb89>

18. See here: <http://sputniknews.com/politics/20151026/1029128786/russia-taliba-communication.html>

19. Waheed Mozhda, an analyst and Taliban sympathizer, has made the revelation. Mozhda's telephone was tapped by the NDS, recording his conversations with members of the Taliban. He actually acted as an interlocutor of Taliban in Kabul. Russian authorities used him as one of their contacts to the insurgent group.

20. See here: <http://www.rferl.org/content/russia-tajikistan-base-helicopters/27293028.html>

21. See for example: [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news\\_125324.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_125324.htm) and here: <http://www.eastwest.ngo/events/6th-meeting-joint-us-russia-working-group-afghan-narcottrafficking>

22. See here: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/49760>

across the country with which this was met, highlighted India's growing influence achieved through development projects. A much more publicized event was the inauguration of the newly-built Afghan parliamentary building by the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Modi used the occasion to deliver an impassioned and comprehensive speech, also taking direct and indirect swipes at Pakistan<sup>23</sup>. The visit signified long-term commitment of India to Afghanistan, despite the NUG's earlier snub.

However, President Ghani's rapprochement to Pakistan in 2015 meant he had to make some concessions which limited cooperation with India. Indeed, one of Ghani's first actions was to suspend a request to India for heavy weaponry which had been lodged by his predecessor<sup>24</sup>. Closer ties between Afghanistan and Pakistan and keeping India at arm's length did not sit well with Delhi but it continued the ongoing projects in a bid to wait out the Afghan-Pakistani honeymoon period.

As may have been expected, the relationship between Islamabad and Kabul soon started to sour and the latter reached out to Delhi to continue its assistance. Whilst initially cold shouldered, Delhi soon reassessed<sup>25</sup> and Modi's visit was followed by the delivery of a single Mi 25 helicopter<sup>26</sup> with three more following soon after. This is significant, because the delivery of lethal capability to Afghanistan has long been a contentious issue due to objections by Pakistan. India seems to have crossed that red line now, however. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) are in dire need of airpower. In the absence of NATO air support, the Taliban have managed to move around in large groups and launch frontal wars in several provinces, according to Haneef Atmar, Afghanistan's National Security Advisor<sup>27</sup>. Additionally the upcoming (2016) delivery of Mi 25s by India and four A 29 Super Tucano fighter jets<sup>28</sup> by the US is expected to greatly boost ANSF's capability to counter major Taliban attacks, especially after the setbacks in Kunduz and Helmand.

Despite the restart of quadrilateral talks about the peace process, Ghani is unlikely to take the risk of shunning India this time. Unless the peace process produces tangible results, Ghani will continue banking on India's military assistance to ensure the survival of the Afghan state.

#### 5.4. Iran

Afghanistan's relationship with Iran did not witness a dramatic change as it did with China or India. Instead, normal interactions continued throughout 2015. Both President Ghani and CEO Abdullah visited Tehran in the year in question. As expected, Afghanistan's Second Deputy CEO, who is considered to be pro-Iran, visited the country multiple times. The visits seem to have had little bearing on the already ongoing relations. Surprisingly, at no point did any of the Afghan leaders bring up the issue of Afghan refugees fighting at behest of Assad regime in Syria<sup>29</sup> in their meetings. While there is ample evidence of Afghan refugees based in Iran being sent by the Iranian security forces to fight in Syria, hard figures are hard to come by.

This and the recent evidence that Afghans may be fighting on both sides in the Yemen conflict are worrisome trends<sup>30</sup>. One of major issues in the

23. See the full text here: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/resources/text-of-modis-speech-to-afghan-parliament/article8029269.ece>

24. See here <http://thediplomat.com/2015/02/why-did-afghanistan-just-suspend-a-request-for-heavy-weaponry-from-india/>

25. <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-rebuffs-afghanistan-on-strategic-meet/article7592059.ece>

26. <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/mi-25-attack-helicopter-gifted-by-india-to-afghanistan-reaches-kabul-3-more-to-follow/articleshow/50275035.cms>

27. Please see his interview with 1TV here (only Dari): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rpFjV-2TBA>

28. <http://www.aveoengineering.com/first-of-20-a-29-super-tucanos-arrive-in-afghanistan/>

29. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/05/iran-recruits-afghan-refugees-fight-save-syrias-bashar-al-assad>

30. See BBC Persian report here: <https://www.facebook.com/snazami.sadaat/videos/1029603543764756/>

future will be the reintegration of surviving combatants back into the Afghan society who might return as religious fanatics. Afghans fighting abroad is nothing new, as seen in conflicts in the Balkans and Chechnya in the 1990s. This time it could be different though because of the raging increasingly sectarianized war in Middle East, and its blowback on South Asia.

It is possible that other imperatives supersede the issue of Afghan refugees in Iran. For instance, Chabahar's becoming the main connecting point to sea for Afghanistan may have a role, especially with the (2016) lifting of economic sanctions on Iran. Improvements in Iran's economy are expected to have an uplifting effect on the regional economy as a whole.

## 5.5. Saudi Arabia

2015 saw increased interaction between Saudi and Afghan officials. Several meetings took place between officials of the foreign ministries of the two countries. In yet another sign of increased powers for the Afghan National Security Council (NSC), key meetings took place at the NSC. The biggest turning point, however, was President Ghani's visit to Riyadh on March 16, 2015. Ghani was received at the airport by King Salman bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud himself<sup>31</sup> – an unprecedented gesture on the part of Saudis. The main outcome of Ghani's visit to the Kingdom was agreement on creating a framework for a strategic partnership. Such warm welcome by Saudi authorities to the new President of Afghanistan may have partially been down to Ghani's cordial relationship with the US and partially because Ghani's bloc managed to defeat the Abdullah Abdullah bloc in the presidential election, which is perceived by the Saudis as more pro-Iranian.

Although little is known about the exact nature of Saudi's Afghanistan policy because of the opacity of its government, revelations by the Taliban that they were pressured by the Saudis not to cause major disruptions during the 2014 presidential election point to an assertive policy of safeguarding its interests in Afghanistan. Saudis feared that Taliban's disruption of election will hit hardest the Pashtun areas, which would dent Ghani's chances and give an edge to Abdullah. According to the report in question, "*promises were also made for rewards if the Taliban complied with Saudi demands, including facilitation in future negotiations with the new president*"<sup>32</sup>. If true, Ghani owes his becoming the president partly to Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. This may explain Ghani's reciprocal actions in making concessions to Pakistan and supporting Saudi's military campaign in Yemen<sup>33</sup>.

## 6. Conclusion

President Ghani has frequently confided that 2015 was the year of survival test for the Afghan state after the full withdrawal of the international combat troops from the country. Despite the failures leading to the fall of the Kunduz city, the general sense is that Afghanistan is not all doom and gloom, as was foreseen by some commentators. However, the real question is how long the Afghan state will be able to survive without

31. <http://president.gov.af/en/news/42995>

32. See the full report here: <http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/PW103-Violence-the-Taliban-and-Afghanistan-s-2014-Elections.pdf>

33. In Dari: <http://www.dw.com/>

international subsidies. For now, it seems the international community will shoulder a greater burden than previously envisioned, because of the emergence of new challenges such as ISIS.

Similarly, the region – the five regional powers covered in this report in particular – has never looked more promising. There is a strong consensus for ensuring stability in the country for the benefit of not only Afghanistan but also the rest of the region. All indications are that this regional consensus will stay intact for quite some time to come. The onus now is also on the actions and decisions of Afghan statesmen on how to keep the region on their side, because the remedies to a number of Afghanistan's malaises lie in an integrated region.

Domestically, the Afghan polity has behaved relatively maturely and has not experienced a great deal of frictions and divisions. Despite some calls for early presidential elections and NUG's failure to conduct electoral reforms – leading to postponing parliamentary elections – Afghan political elite have largely refrained from derailing the NUG. If it avoids major crises, the NUG is in a good position to complete its term, even if it does not fully implement the agreement reached between President Ghani and CEO Abdullah, including calling the Loya Jirga for amending the Constitution.

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