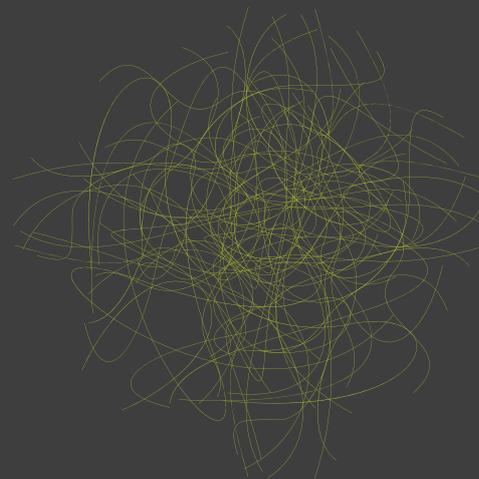


**Sources of Tension
in Afghanistan and
Pakistan: A Regional
Perspective**

**Afghanistan:
Future
Scenarios**

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1. Introduction

Between 2001 and 2013, Afghanistan experienced a longer period of political stability than at any time since the adoption of a democratic constitution in 1964. The only certainty, as the country prepares for the election of a new president and the withdrawal of international forces in 2014, is that a distinctive era in the country's political development is coming to an end. Widely different scenarios describe how the country might evolve beyond 2014. At the optimistic end lies "peace and prosperity", with continuity in the political institutions and an end to the conflict. At the pessimistic end lies "civil war", with a break down in the institutions and escalation of the conflict. In between lie different variations on the themes of institutional robustness and break-down. Which of these widely differing but plausible scenarios best describes the actual outcome,, depends on decisions by key actors such as the insurgent leadership or US administration, and on the outcome of key processes such as the 2014 Afghan presidential election.

The Regional Dimension

There has been a regional dimension to the Afghan conflict at every stage since its outbreak in 1978. Indeed it is part of Afghanistan's historical legacy that domestic political actors follow closely developments in the neighbouring territories and have periodically sought opportunities to leverage relationships in the region to obtain domestic advantage. The classic example of Afghan actors competing through their regional relationships was the period 1996 to 2001, when the Taliban received support from Pakistan and the Northern Alliance from Iran, India, Russia and Tajikistan. The notion of Afghan actors having regional backers is this well established in Afghan political thought. With the rolling back of US engagement the regional dimension is widely expected to become more important. Regional powers can expect to be impacted by the different scenarios. Ultimately it matters for the regional powers whether Afghanistan does indeed embark on the path of peace and prosperity, or whether it regresses to civil war. And through their collective and bilateral decision making, the regional powers have some opportunities to influence developments towards a more favourable outcome.

The Legacy of Relative Stability

The long period of stability in the wake of the Bonn Accords has set the scene for important political and economic developments. Irrespective of the final assessment of the US-led counter-insurgency efforts, the presence of the international security umbrella meant that a decade long insurgency never posed a serious threat to the survival of the central government. The process of political and economic development could proceed, in large part isolated from the effects of the insurgency. Some of the headline achievements arising from the decade of political and economic development include the establishment of representative government with active participation of all the country's ethnicities, a unified national administration reaching all districts of the country, unprecedented freedom of speech, expanded political and economic participation for both women and the minority ethnic groups, overhaul of much of the legal framework. Public provision of health care and education was massively expanded, which was reflected in significant improvement in mortality and other social indicators. There has been sustained high economic growth, leading to more than doubling of average incomes. A new currency was introduced, inflation was kept under control, the banking system was re-established and the public finance system was overhauled. A national ring-road was built, electricity generation and transmission were expanded and steps were taken to allow for the long term exploitation of the country's mineral wealth. The country's population reached its highest level ever, driven by a mass return of refugees from neighbouring countries and falling mortality rates. National security forces and the intelligence service were built up.

Set against these notable achievements of the long period of stability, however, the outcome has failed to match several aspects of the aspirations that Afghans and internationals expressed at the start of the period.

Endemic corruption has weakened all institutions. The systems of government have remained highly centralised with poorly developed systems of accountability. Despite improvement in domestic revenue-raising, Afghanistan has reached a remarkable level of external aid dependence. The rule of law has remained highly problematic, as the criminal justice system is perceived as corrupt, arbitrary and subject to political patronage. Economic progress has been highly skewed. Elites, well-connected to the new Afghan leadership and the US military, have benefited massively from contracted service provision to the military and other activities such as land-grabbing and property development. Even the utility of the newly developed security forces is much debated. The operating costs for the security forces have become the largest item in the national budget and the scale of security spending ensures that in the medium term the Afghan government is dependent on a fiscal subsidy, currently mainly provided by the US.

The Trajectory Beyond 2014: Key Variables

The 2002-2013 achievements are all at stake in the sense that worst case scenarios, involving a civil war or Taliban restoration could, in principle, reverse these developments. However in considering possible scenarios for Afghanistan's trajectory beyond 2014, this paper simplifies the discussion by focusing on a limited number of variables which capture the key differences between the optimistic and pessimistic outcomes.

These variables are: (i) the level of insurgent violence; (ii) the robustness of national political and security institutions; and (iii) the availability of US funding for the security forces.

The complexity of the conflict means that each of these variables is both dependent and independent. For example the survival of a strong national presidency after 2014, with full authority over its provincial administrations is likely to deter insurgent violence and help end the conflict – and is in this sense an independent variable. But conversely, progress towards reduction of violence, for example through an insurgent ceasefire, would most likely strengthen national institutions and boost the authority of the central government over its provincial administrations – an example of government institutions as a dependent variable.

2. Overview of Domestic Sources of Tension

Underlying the key domestic variables of robustness of the national institutions and levels of insurgent violence are a range of “sources of tension”, which have been investigated in the earlier rounds of STAR RP, and which help determine the fate of the national institutions and trajectory of the conflict. These sources of tension illustrate the way in which there are regional dimensions to many aspects of the Afghan conflict.

Source of Tension 1: Contested Identity

Afghanistan's contested identity is a fundamental source of tensions. The ideological element of the insurgency is an attempt by militarised clerical networks to impose an Islamic Emirate, in which they reserve the right to challenge any institution as un-Islamic. As the withdrawal of international troops has progressed, insurgents have been obliged to construct a rhetoric which highlights their case to fight for an Islamic system, rather than simply fighting against foreign occupation. However insurgent violence is also underpinned by a criminal economy, resting on kidnapping, extortion and trafficking. This provides both the means and motivation for sustaining the conflict beyond the period of international military presence. Public corruption has become one of the features of the post-2001 political order. Although the extent to which violence is grievance driven is open to interpretation, the critique of “administrative” and “moral” corruption has featured in insurgent propaganda and is part of the narrative through which insurgents mobilise against the government. Inequality of income and opportunity is also related to the issue of public corruption and is a source of tension. A new elite has emerged during the decade of international intervention.

In the earliest stages of the Bonn Process, commanders and faction leaders from the old Northern Alliance seemed to be the main beneficiaries, as the agreement in Bonn gave them control of ministries and they proceeded to take over security institutions and use their influence to profit from trafficking and government contracts or licences. Over time, the elite expanded to include a new generation of well-connected entrepreneurs, of all ethnicities, who used their patronage in the presidential palace, control over security institutions and connections

to international forces, to benefit from government or military supply contracts, property development and top level opportunities in the rapidly expanding economy. The most illustrative case study of elite capture of the benefits of recent economic progress is the Kabul Bank episode. The inner circle of the bank, key members of the new elite, was able to appropriate \$900 million in illegal loans and rely upon protection from the presidential palace, to limit prosecutions and ultimately bail the bank out. Meanwhile, the *de facto* delegation by government of security responsibilities to leaders of militias in the provinces has helped shape the conflict. On the one hand, instances of the strongmen exercising arbitrary unaccountable authority over the people in their areas have been a source of grievance. On the other hand, apologists for various versions of this approach have pointed out that local militias have often proved most effective in combating the Taliban. One of the most controversial sources of tension has been ethnic politics because of the tradition in Afghan public discourse of asserting that ethnicity does not matter. One interpretation of the political order which developed in Afghanistan after 2001 and was enshrined in the 2004 Constitution, was that it embodied a new ethnic settlement. In this settlement, a southern Pashtun leader ensured that all four major ethnic groups had access to power and the patronage system linked to the presidential office. However periodically some Pashtuns sympathetic to the insurgency have claimed that the post-2001 settlement concedes too much privilege to the northern minorities. Periodically there is an ethnically polarised debate on the issue of government centralism. Broadly speaking, Pashtun political figures tend to favour continuation of a highly centralised system, while there is most support for the idea of decentralisation among the northern minorities.

Source of Tension 2: The Ideological Struggle & Organised Crime

The sources of tension with the most obvious regional dimensions are the ideological struggle to define the Islamic identity of the state and the organised crime element of the insurgency.

The official Afghan Taliban messaging is that the movement only aspires to achieve change within Afghanistan and it has no aspirations to radicalise the region. However during the insurgency, the Afghan Taliban have maintained links with Islamist groups originating from all countries in the wider region. The fate of the Afghan Taliban and their armed campaign will impact on regional militant groups which are currently loosely allied with them. Possibilities range from a Taliban victory strengthening the regional groups to a peace settlement opening up the Taliban to cooperating in decommissioning the groups. Armed crime is inherently a regional phenomenon, because of the propensity of militant groups involved in criminal enterprises to exploit the borders. Pakistan is the Afghanistan neighbour most implicated by insurgent armed crime because of the large volume of poorly regulated cross border traffic. However, Iran and Russia are both badly affected by the narcotics trade sourced in Afghanistan. A protracted conflict after 2014 which left much of Afghanistan controlled by the Taliban would increase the scope for regional armed crime, giving extortion and criminal gangs the option to locate some of their activities in the area beyond the reach of state authorities.

3. The Regional Powers' Interests in the Outcomes: Challenges & Opportunities

The Afghan outcome has implications for the regional powers, which can broadly be characterised as a series of security challenges in the unfavourable scenarios and a series of economic opportunities in the favourable scenarios.

i. Security Challenges

The security challenge relates to the continuing activities of Islamist militant groups with a regional focus. The five regional powers face their own version of the international terrorist threat which originally precipitated the US intervention. At present, a range of Islamist groups which have recruited personnel from the region, operate under the umbrella of the Afghan insurgency.¹ Most are headquartered in Pakistan's FATA, but deploy fighters to Afghanistan. The unfolding scenarios will determine the extent to which they obtain freedom of operation in Afghanistan after 2014 and the extent to which the Kabul administration remains committed to preventing these groups launching operations against countries in the region using Afghanistan as a base. An effective national government after 2014 would be likely to be committed to excluding such militant groups, or at least sustaining security operations against them, not least because aid donors are likely to demand this. Conversely, there are concerns that either restoration of the Islamic Emirate, or any of the serious conflict scenarios, could result in militant groups receiving the patronage and freedom of operation to increase activities against regional powers. One of the key issues in assessing the extent to which regional security threats could be increased by Afghan developments, is the question of what increased capacity militant groups might receive through greater freedom of operation in Afghanistan, which they do not already enjoy in Pakistan. In a worst case, militant groups could hope to receive state patronage and protection, secure bases, the propaganda boost of being associated with claimed defeat of a super power, freedom from drones and aggressive CT operations. In a situation in which resistance to the Taliban collapsed, the militant groups' existing capacity would also be freed up as they would no longer be required for combat operations in Afghanistan. However, the regional and international militant groups operating within the Afghan insurgency receive some form of each of these facilities² at present and so any increase in their freedom to operate associated with developments in Afghanistan would be incremental rather than revolutionary.

The long tradition of proxy warfare in the region further increases the risk of security spill-over from any outcome which does not leave a responsible state actor in control of the Afghan territory.

The parallels with the period after the Soviet withdrawal are pertinent. In that period, some of training and basing infrastructure which had been developed for Pakistani support to the Afghan *mujahideen's* guerilla war was turned over to the nascent Kashmiri uprising.³ The key state actors in the region have years of experience of co-opting or supporting *jihadi* organisations as proxies. In previous rounds of the conflict, both Iran and Saudi Arabia have been accused of conducting proxy warfare by supporting militant *Shi'a* groups (Iran) against Sunni-Salafist groups (Saudi Arabia).

1. For example, see Dr. Syed Manzar Abbas Zaidi 2013 and IISS 2011 for the geography of the regional jihadi groups in Afghanistan

2. For example, see Dressler 2010 and Mukhametrakhimova 2013

3. For an example of an account of the transition from Afghan *jihad* to Kashmir *jihad*, see Bose, Sumantra. "Kashmir: Roots of Conflict, Paths to Peace." Harvard University Press. 2005.

Pakistan and India have been accused of proxy warfare by Pakistan supporting *Lashkar e Tayyeba* (LeT) and other militant groups willing to strike Indian targets; and India supporting Balochistan separatists operating out of Kandahar. There is a risk that efforts to mitigate this kind of regional competition could actually make it worse. This would be the case if the regional powers and Pakistan competitively provided political and economic backing to Afghan faction leaders in the hope of winning their cooperation against the rival's proxies. The fact that such backing is generally provided covertly means that Afghan political rhetoric does not provide an accurate reflection of the extent of support being delivered. Accusing one's political rival of having regional benefactors is a convenient rhetorical device. However the history of proxy warfare means that Afghan political and military actors are more open to the idea of receiving external patronage than in countries with less experience of this form of politics.

In addition to the threat of ideological or proxy-driven militant violence, there is a potential threat of spill-over of organised crime if Afghanistan reverted to a lawless state. The most direct threat concerns narcotics, as all regional powers are potential markets for Afghan opium and heroin. However groups involved in the Afghan insurgency have already developed criminal activities, such as kidnapping and extortion rackets, on a regional⁴ scale. Hitherto, regional powers have been less affected than Pakistan, but there is a risk of criminality developing in parallel to militant violence.

Afghanistan continues to be an important source country for mass migration and exacerbation of violent conflict in the country risks triggering off a further exodus. Of the regional powers barring Pakistan, Iran is the country most likely to face an influx, because much of the population of northern and central Afghanistan has a history of migration to Iran and maintains links with the country. However, in smaller numbers, all other regional powers could expect to see increased numbers of asylum seekers and illegal migrants, in case of an unfavourable outcome in Afghanistan.

A variant on the possibility of proxy competition between the regional powers would involve the powers responding to perceived threats associated with the United States post-2014 presence in Afghanistan.

This notion periodically crops up in Afghan political discourse, in keeping with the local tradition of emphasising the country's geo-strategic importance. Such a development would require the US to pursue a long term military presence in Afghanistan, to project capability towards China's western border and Central Asia, and for use in potential operations against Iran. Despite the propensity of some Afghans and Afghanistan-watchers to keep alive the prospect of such a rivalry, any risk of Iran, Russia or China being pushed into some form of intervention in Afghanistan by concerns about the nature of the US presence is receding. US ambitions for a post-2014 presence have been scaled back and do not amount to a major base. The US has consistently signalled that it plans no regional power project through the post-2014 presence. In response to the scaled-down US ambitions, regional powers are more likely to be threatened by too few Americans - or an abrupt withdrawal, than by too few Americans. This reality was reflected in the debate on the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) when, contrary to Afghan political tradition of trying to play off patrons, the president acknowledged that most regional powers supported the agreement.

4. For example, see Peters 2012 for an account of the profound criminalisation of the "Haqqani Network".

ii. Economic Opportunity

Economic investment by the regional powers in Afghanistan has emerged as an important factor. The principal investments so far planned are by China in copper and hydro-carbons and by India in iron ore. They have added a new element to the regional power calculus, to the extent that these investments will only materialise if Afghanistan remains stable and secure enough to allow these projects to mature, and if the Afghan national authorities remain disposed to honour the contracts and maintain the legal framework. The investments represent a potential peace and stability dividend, in the sense that both parties benefit from maintaining the conditions in which these investments mature. However, evidence so far suggests that the impact on Afghan and regional actors has been limited and certainly not transformational.⁵ Security conditions in, and access to, the areas where the investments are located, have remained poor. And the regional investors, while remaining engaged in Afghanistan, have shown no inclination to become more actively involved in maintaining Afghan security and stability than they were before developing the investment projects. A comparative example is that of the pipeline rivalry in Afghanistan during the period of Taliban government. UNOCAL (Union Oil Company of California) and BRIDAS (The Bidas Corporation, an Argentinian oil company) both tried to develop pipeline projects and BRIDAS maintained representation in Afghanistan throughout the period. But there was no evidence of the prospective project affecting either the course of the war or Afghanistan's international relations. Rather, economic investments are a dependent variable. They render peace and stability more profitable, but not necessarily more probable. Accordingly, in response to the post-2014 uncertainty and serious difficulties of developing large scale economic activities in a conflict environment, the flagship Chinese project in Ainak, Logar has been delayed and flagged for re-negotiation.

4. Scenarios

i. Peace & Progress

Under this scenario, Afghan political institutions function as anticipated in the 2004 Constitution and levels of violence fall sufficiently so that the internal conflict is essentially over. The conditions of improved security and legitimate, representative government allow for sustained economic and social progress. Optimistic supporters of the Bonn Process in 2001 had hoped for such an outcome. Despite the progressive scaling back of ambition, each phase of the international intervention in Afghanistan has at least been informed by the notion that some form of peace and progress is attainable.

A peace and progress scenario would require the following developments:

- The 2014 political transition should be an unambiguous success in that the presidential election delivers a competent new leadership enjoying broad legitimacy. This would increase Afghan confidence in the durability of the political system and reduce the ability of insurgents to challenge or even co-opt civilian and security officials. It would also allow for the launch of government reforms, to address grievances such as those concerning corruption.

5. Matthew C. DuPee, "Wavering Investors, Legal Uncertainty Threaten Afghan Mining Sector's Potential" *World Politics review*, September 2013

- The insurgency would have to either end abruptly or rapidly peter out. Conceivably this could happen through a peace agreement with the Taliban Movement or a mass defection from the insurgency in response to the withdrawal of international troops – reluctant insurgents voting with their feet against the war.
- A peace agreement signed by a newly elected and strong government would most likely include relatively few concessions to the Taliban but might nonetheless be preferable for them rather than trying to fight a civil war which they could not win.

As an effective Afghan government is at the heart of the peace and progress scenario. It would also require that the US sustains its commitment to cover the fiscal gap and fund the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), at least until they could be downsized through a new round of disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR).

The peace and progress scenario is one of the most unlikely outcomes for the years immediately after 2014.

The 2014 election will be held in a challenging context. In the first place, conflict and insecurity mean that it is impossible to organise transparent voting across whole swathes of the country. Furthermore, in previous electoral rounds both pro- and anti-incumbent candidates have engaged in fraud. The Afghan government has never acknowledged the extent of fraud or wholeheartedly cooperated with efforts to strengthen the electoral administration to overcome it. And in any case, national level political competition largely takes place within the circle of those who have been involved in government over the past decade. There is neither a clear opposition, nor a well-developed reform camp. Therefore, even barring a disaster in the presidential election, it is most likely to deliver “contested continuity” - for example, with members of the incumbent palace team claiming victory and being forced to offer some concessions to rivals who complain about electoral fraud. There are poor prospects of the 2014 election delivering a clear mandate for reform.

A messy continuity in the Kabul government is precisely what insurgents require to build a case for sustaining their war effort beyond the departure of foreign troops. They can claim that the Kabul regime is illegitimate, as it is a continuation of the regime imposed by the foreigners and the same foreigners fixed the election so as to install their preferred puppet.

An ineffective new government resistant to reform and an insurgency determined to sustain an armed struggle against it would be sufficient to block prospects of peace and progress, even if the US does decide to maintain its funding of the Afghan Government.

ii. North-South Split

A de facto partition is a scenario which deserves consideration, although there are reasons why it is also one of the less likely outcomes.

If it were to come about, it would be because the Taliban or a re-worked insurgent coalition, succeeded in taking control of the south of the country, but the population in the north of the country managed to resist. Re-

cent history suggests that this is unlikely through a secession movement, as both parties would claim to be the legitimate Afghan government and lay claim on the whole national territory, rather than accepting the half of the country they actually controlled.

A disastrously-managed election could contribute to such a scenario, although it would not alone be sufficient to precipitate it. The most obvious route from a botched election to partition would be if the incumbent administration over-played its hand by trying to rig the election in favour of a candidate with little popular support and in so doing excluded a candidate who enjoyed a strong base of support in the north. If efforts at mediation failed, the northern candidate could claim himself elected and the civil administration and security institutions could split according to which of the two self-proclaimed presidents they backed. In addition to an electoral dispute, other aggravating factors would be required to precipitate such a chain of events. The risks could be increased by escalating ethnic tensions around the election campaign, break down of relations between people who had hitherto cooperated in government and trading of accusations between the two main camps. (Most likely, those favouring the southern candidate would call their rivals secessionists and those favouring the northern candidate would call their rivals Taliban apologists). Given that no credible Afghan political movement or figure has hitherto actively sought partition, it could only happen as an unintended consequence or last resort, as the political leadership struggled to cope with a crisis. For example, northerners who believed they had rightfully won the election might settle for a “rump administration” which did not cover the Pashtun south, if they believed that the administration in those provinces was in any case surrendering to the Taliban.

A cut off of US funding of the ANSF could be part of the sequence of events precipitating the unintended move towards de facto partition. However, it too would be neither a sufficient nor necessary condition. Rapid and mass desertion would be a likely outcome of a fiscal crisis which left the ANSF unpaid. This would lead those political leaders with a base in the north to conclude that Taliban takeover of the south was inevitable. It would also most likely lead to an unravelling of the fiscal centralisation which has taken place since 2002, with regional strongmen reasserting control of revenue sources in their areas of influence. North and south, the rival presidents would have to court the support of these “strongmen”, with their armed forces and control over customs and tolls. A “creeping partition” is also possible, if developments in the post-2014 period take North and South on different trajectories, with increased government control and economic activity in the north, accompanied by roll back of government presence in the south. At some stage the northern elites would be bound to respond by questioning the share of southerners and Pashtun elites in government patronage. This could undo the undeclared ethno-regional formulae which under-pinned Kabul politics up to 2013.

There are several reasons why the partition scenario is particularly unlikely.

In the first place all mainstream Afghan political leaders have consistently conducted politics within a Kabul-centric framework: i.e. they seek a share of power in Kabul, rather than a break from Kabul. Only as a last resort would any of them surrender their presence in Kabul in a political dispute.

Secondly, despite a history of ethnic-based political mobilisation post 2002, the current Afghan political elite has ample experience of cross-ethnic alliance-formation. Therefore the political alliances in a badly disputed presidential election would be unlikely to be neatly divided north-south. A protesting northern candidate would struggle to win the allegiance of a chunk of the administration, as all loyalties would be divided.

Thirdly, in the absence of radical developments such as the implosion of the ANSF, the Taliban are a long way from acquiring the military capability which would allow them to occupy the south and push the anti-Taliban forces back into the north.

iii. Low-Intensity Conflict

This is the scenario which essentially represents continuity – violence does not escalate through 2014 but does not end either.

Under the low intensity conflict scenario, the Taliban Movement tries to sustain its insurgency against the Afghan government after both the election of the new president and the international troop withdrawal. However the Taliban fail to make major military gains. They are perhaps able to expel government forces from some of the remoter districts in the South and East. But they are neither able to take over provincial centres, nor to cut the main east-west highway. The mass defections that they have counted on in the wake of US withdrawal do not occur. After the high risk period around 2014 has passed, it becomes clear that the insurgency does not pose an existential threat to the Afghan government and insurgents have no realistic prospect of taking the capital or splitting the country. However, the government is obliged to maintain security spending at a high level, the Taliban find ways of maintaining morale and raising resources for an open-ended fight and the low intensity conflict is sufficient to prevent normalisation and protect a criminalised economy in the half dozen or so provinces badly affected.

For the Afghan security forces to hold their own in an ongoing conflict and prevent the insurgents from escalating violence, continuation of the external funding of the ANSF would be necessary – however, sustained funding would be a necessary but not sufficient condition to contain the insurgency in the form of a low intensity conflict.

iv. Taliban Restoration

Under this scenario, the Taliban would regain control of most of Afghanistan within a relatively short period after 2014.

Unlike in the case of de facto partition, in this scenario, resistance to Taliban hegemony collapses and those associated with the pre-2014 regime either cooperate with the Taliban as junior partners or else flee. This would result in the re-emergence of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, with Mullah Omar or one of his inner circle taking over as head of state.

Those in the Taliban Movement who believe that such an outcome is attainable count on a combination of political and military success. The current Taliban commander's handbook (Lahya) devotes much attention to

the process of co-opting government officials and military. The leadership strategy for moving from their current guerilla stage to taking larger swathes of territory and administrative centres depends upon the civilian administration and troops defecting to them. Such a strategy is inspired by their experience in Pashtun areas in 1994 and 1995, when mujahideen groups and governors nominally under the authority of President Rabani either went over to the Taliban or retreated. Although defections to the Taliban have so far not been on a scale to indicate that such hopes are realistic, Taliban leaders calculate that the US withdrawal will alter the military balance in their favour, enable them to up the pressure on beleaguered government positions in the south and precipitate the mass defections which they are counting on. If ANSF morale were to collapse and its forces pull back to the cities ("fortress Kabul"), this would help the Taliban to build momentum and claim to their followers and enemies alike that they are the long term winners. The pre-2001 experience of course indicates that even a Taliban advance to Maidan Shahr, or even takeover of the capital, is not sufficient to give them control of the country. However, factors which could push northerners to make their peace with the Taliban are the centralisation of security structures and the massive accumulation of assets overseas and in Kabul by many of those who led the pre-2001 anti-Taliban resistance. The Taliban probably expect most of the current leadership simply to flee the country in the face of a crisis. Indeed, an exodus by nouveau riche Kabul regime supporters intent on protecting their assets is more likely than either heroic resistance or an attempt at a *modus vivendi* with the Taliban. The Taliban could nonetheless seek to co-opt some of the remainder by offering protection for their wealth in exchange for obeisance.

A cut off of US funding to the ANSF would be the single factor most likely to improve the prospects of the Taliban achieving a restoration of the Islamic Emirate. This could be the trigger for the mass desertions which they count on. Whether such a development provoked civil war, partition or restoration would largely depend on whether the "strong men" that the Kabul regime has cultivated in the south and north as part of their security strategy had the wherewithal to resist a resurgent Taliban military.

v. Civil War

For the current insurgency to mutate into a civil war, the scale of violence would have to increase, rather than decreasing, as international forces withdraw, and the armed opposition would have to broaden their support to mobilise sections of the population that, during the international presence, were either neutral or aligned with the government.

The factor limiting the scale of post-2002 violence has been the apparent inability of the Taliban Movement to mobilise real political support. Throughout a decade of insurgency the Taliban largely retained its original political character as a faction of armed Pashtun clergy. Whether through intimidation, propaganda or out-performing a corrupt administration, Taliban insurgents have at times enjoyed the cooperation of the rural population. But the Taliban have not mobilised them.

Although a civil war is far from being an inevitable outcome, it is a plausible scenario which could result from an unsuccessful Taliban bid for power

after the security transition. A civil war is what happens if the Taliban leadership tries to escalate the conflict during 2014 but fails to restore the Islamic Emirate, while the forces which have been allied to the Kabul government fail either to contain the Taliban in the south or push through a de facto partition.

Experience of the civil war of the 1990's suggests that any such conflict would involve multiple actors and narratives, rather than a simple Taliban versus anti-Taliban, or north versus south narrative. The NATO-government security strategy in the run up to transition has already mobilised significant parts of the rural Pashtun population to fight against the Taliban, in the form of the ALP. The Taliban have responded by targeting the ALP and government supporters. Some of the local conflicts in the current insurgency have already taken on characteristics of a civil war, with neighbour killing neighbour. Post-2014, a concerted bid by the Taliban to take over Pashtun majority areas in the south would result in a scaling up of these local fights. Despite the publicity given to the official strategy of building up formal armed forces, the NATO and government strategies over the past decade have encouraged the emergence of a new cadre of Pashtun "strongmen", leading armed forces aligned to the government. These forces at least could be expected to resist the Taliban in the south. Conversely, although the north is usually considered outside the Taliban's natural territory, the movement has an armed presence in most of the provinces. If the conflict escalated there is little doubt that the Taliban leadership would try to scale up their operations in the north also. To sustain conflict in the long run, the Taliban would also have to refresh their economic base to replace income from extortion related to the international military spend. Their options for developing criminal enterprise would include: broadening the scope of kidnap operations; strengthening the hold over the narcotics sector; and international criminal operations which capitalise on Afghanistan's location in a globally connected lawless region.

There are several possible checks to a civil war outcome.

In the first place, the Taliban may lack the capacity to scale up their fight in 2014 and beyond. The parallel with the 1990's would be the way in which many *mujahideen* fighters demobilised and commanders refused to take part in the factional conflict. Second, the leadership will require more fighters ,at just the time when supporters hope that the main objective has been achieved – the departure of foreign troops. Pragmatists in the movement might finally articulate their objection to unnecessary violence.

5. Public Policy Choices Affecting Post-2014 Outcomes

The regional powers inherit a tradition of maintaining contradictory overt and covert stances. The best hope of regional powers contributing to Afghan stability is if the powers can individually and collectively harmonise the overt and covert or semi-covert strands of strategy. This would entail supporting the "official process" - i.e. the installation of an elected successor to the Karzai government- and then using their influence with Afghan power-brokers and "proxies" to keep them on board and perhaps eventually even accommodate the Taliban. Elements of this support and influence strategy would include:

i. The National Elections Scheduled for 2014

The outcome of the 2014 presidential election is one of the most important variables in deciding between the positive and negative scenarios. The outcome, in terms of whether elections are held on time and whether the incoming president is effective and enjoys domestic and external legitimacy, is beyond the ability of any one international or regional actor to determine. However, there are opportunities to influence the process towards a positive outcome, which strengthens peace and stability.

Regional powers should lend diplomatic support to international efforts to discourage any electoral postponement because an attempt to install an un-elected interim administration would be even more destabilising than meeting the challenge of holding elections in the prevailing security conditions.

Regional powers should join international efforts to support the Independent Election Commission in delivering transparent elections according to Afghan electoral law, which corresponds well with international standards. Although the IEC is fully Afghan in composition, regional and international support helps provide an important element of institutional continuity at a time of political transition and discourages attempts from any Afghan quarter to sabotage the electoral process.

Regional powers should join with other donors to Afghanistan in contingency planning for dealing with an election aftermath which produces no clear result. The contingency plans should both prepare good offices for help to resolve any electoral dispute which the election administration is unable to overcome and should ensure that no benefit should accrue to the party which has precipitated a crisis. The regional powers may even be able to use their political influence with Afghan political figures to preempt a crisis, by helping to deter opportunistic challenges to the result once the electoral authorities have identified a winner.

ii. The Role of the “Power Oligarchy” & New Local Actors

The non-party patronage-oriented political system which has developed in Afghanistan since 2002 means that the new power oligarchy consists of a cohort of in the order of one hundred politically and militarily influential figures. They lack any formal or visible institutional structure, but will exercise immense influence in determining the course of the transition through 2014. Insofar as there is an “establishment” in the Kabul-centric political system, it is formed by these one hundred or so men. They play a role in electoral politics as power-brokers and so their making and breaking of alliances influences the electoral outcome. For any major political decision, such as whether or not to go ahead with elections or even signing the Bilateral Security Agreement with the US or proceeding with Taliban negotiations, the President has some degree of consultation with the power-brokers. Power-brokers also have to decide whether to stay on in Afghanistan through 2014 or to relocate themselves and their assets abroad. As some of them play a role in leading militias in insurgency affected regions, they have to decide whether to continue resisting the Taliban or to make their peace with them. In case of a potential deal with the Taliban the power brokers would have to weigh up the pros and cons

– the advantage of stability versus the disadvantage of potentially having to share resources and privilege in a system with a broader base.

If regional powers were involved in any diplomatic work in support of the electoral process being pursued to its conclusion, they should consider engaging with the power brokers to seek their cooperation. There is a regional dimension to this, in the sense that traditionally major power brokers in Afghanistan have cultivated relations with regional powers, to such an extent that these links are widely considered a part of the power brokers' political identity. Within Afghan politics the power brokers are widely perceived to be subject to influence by regional patrons, especially the governments of Pakistan, India and Iran. Although popular perceptions probably greatly exaggerate the extent of regional leverage over the power-brokers, they do provide an opportunity for the regional powers in engaging with them.

This is an area in which the primary interest of the regional powers lies in “doing no harm” i.e. avoiding the kind of competitive influencing process which could result if they really did try to recruit Afghan clients. Instead, regional powers, in maintaining relationships with members of the Afghan establishment, should work in concert and coordinate measures in favour of achieving a favourable election outcome and an end to the insurgency.

iii. Ethnic Tensions

There is a significant risk that ethnic tensions will rise during the presidential election and political transition.

As insurgents seek to sustain the conflict beyond the period of international troop presence they need to articulate a new narrative to rationalise the armed struggle. One of the options facing them is ethnic mobilisation as they can try to present themselves as the force defending Pashtun rights in the face of alleged power-grabbing by non-Pashtun minorities. Parallel to this, there is a risk of ethnic mobilisation taking place during presidential election campaigning. Post-2002 government has been informed by a series of undeclared conventions guiding the participation of representatives of the ethnic groups. These conventions, including that which has hitherto preserved the position of head of state for a Pashtun, are likely to be contested during the election. A degree of ethnic mobilisation is still compatible with a successful election outcome, however, if it ultimately leads to a process of alliance building and re-negotiation of the terms of association of the ethnicities by the end of the campaign.

There is an implicit regional dimension to ethnic relations in Afghanistan because of the ethnic geography. Each of the major ethnic groups of Afghanistan has a presence in a neighbouring country and a history of cross-border links. This gives rise to accusations in Afghan political rhetoric of neighbours and regional powers supporting their ethnic cousins in Afghanistan. There are no opportunities for regional powers to advance their own interests or to boost chances of a settlement by directly addressing ethnic tensions, or supporting ethnic proxies, within Afghanistan. Instead this is another field which should be informed by the do no harm principle. While remaining broadly supportive of continuity and stability, the regional powers should avoid giving an impression of “picking ethnic favourites”, something which would yield few benefits for any power involved but would be exploited in Afghan rhetoric and mobilisation.

iv. Relations with Pakistan

The Afghanistan-Pakistan relationship is key to the country's long term stability because of the preponderance of security incidents which have a cross-border element as well as the extent of economic inter-action and cross-border population movement.

Periodically since 2002 the Afghan government has toyed with the idea of leveraging its relationship with the regional powers so as to curtail Pakistani influence. The classic justification for this is of course that Afghanistan as a sovereign nation is free to conduct foreign relations as its government sees fit. However, there is a high risk of generating zero sum behaviour and provoking further rounds of proxy competition. The likelihood of the favourable scenarios is increased if the regional powers, in particular India, operate within a cooperative rather than zero-sum framework - and if Pakistan reciprocates.

v. Negotiations with the Taliban

Since 2010, the possibility of a negotiated settlement with the Taliban has been much discussed, even if there has been little progress towards it and no discernible impact on the conduct of the war by either side.

In principle, the continuing presence of the Taliban's Political Commission in Qatar means that a framework exists through which such negotiations could take place. One of the possible routes to the peace and prosperity scenario is still a settlement, through which the Taliban end hostilities and either accept a minor share in government or a legal status for the movement which allows its members to reintegrate with security protection and some access to patronage structures. However, the limited progress to date suggests that the likelihood of such an outcome is low and in any case a settlement with the Taliban leadership would help to reduce violence rather than ending it. Intermediate options are more likely, in which a significant part of the insurgency opts not to fight on against the Afghan government after 2014, but hard-liners and criminalised factions reject any dispensation in Kabul. A comprehensive settlement is desirable, but unlikely, and something short of a full settlement could still be helpful. The regional powers have opportunities to increase the likelihood of a settlement and offer incentives for increased insurgent buy-in to the settlement. The regional powers' ongoing support for continuity and stability during the political and security transitions offers the most important incentive to insurgents to reconcile with the Kabul-based order, as it will disabuse them of the notion that they have a prospect of recruiting regional support to sustain their challenge to Kabul. Additional measures to restrict the ability of insurgents to exploit the neighbourhood for non-state support could be helpful and would involve further cooperation to curtail the flow of money and weapons to insurgents. While the US has led diplomatic efforts to bring the Taliban to the negotiating table, it has also periodically engaged with the regional powers. As these efforts continue into 2014, higher profile engagement by the regional powers would be helpful. The regional caucusing conducted by Lakhdar Brahimi and Francisc Vendrell when they served as UN representatives before the US intervention, provides a precedent. Although all state actors have consistently expressed support for an Afghan-led process, there is now a strong

case for an international mediator with regional support. The regionally-backed mediator could be helpful in the case of either a comprehensive settlement involving all of the Taliban Movement and a general ceasefire, or more piecemeal progress involving part of the movement. The support structures which have kept the insurgency going have hitherto operated on a regional scale. The challenge for a regionally backed mediator would be to work out how pro-peace Taliban could benefit from equivalent support structures. Furthermore, given the potential threat posed by Taliban relations with regional militant groups the regional powers could work through the mediator to ensure that any settlement involved credible provisions for the Taliban to disengage from these groups.

vi. The US's Long-Term Security Presence

US planning for the post-2014 security presence has focused on maintaining a division level strength for training and support to the ANSF and similar strength for counter-terrorism operations. However, the US leadership has made it clear that any commitment to such a deployment is dependent on finalisation of a Bilateral Security Agreement. The failure of the two sides to agree the terms of a BSA led the administration to raise the possibility of maintaining no security presence in Afghanistan after 2014 - the zero option. The scenarios above focus on the issue of the continuity of US funding of ANSF rather than the presence of US forces although in reality the two are likely to run in tandem – it is unlikely that the US administration would sustain a high level of ANSF funding without an agreed presence for the training contingent and it is even less likely that the administration would be willing or able to leave a military contingent in Afghanistan, if the ANSF were unfunded. Separately, NATO has agreed to contribute to the post-2014 training and support mission although in reality NATO planning will also depend on the US deployment decision.

The key issue for the regional powers is how to respond to, and complement, the US and NATO security presence. The modest size of currently mooted US/NATO contingents has helped the US reassure regional powers that they are focused on maintaining Afghan stability rather than threatening regional interests beyond Afghanistan. There are no realistic options for a regional substitute for the planned US/NATO mission and a complete US exit without such an alternative would lead the field open for Afghanistan based non-state actors to destabilise Pakistan and northern neighbours. Furthermore, attempts to use forces from the region to substitute for or even complement the US/NATO mission, could be even more destabilising than the residual US/NATO presence. None of the overlapping regional groupings around South and Central Asia has the capacity to deploy a joint force and an individual country mission would risk triggering the impression or reality of competition for influence in Afghanistan. However, given the importance of continuity in security assistance in achieving a favourable outcome and given that the regional actors have such a stake in this outcome, they have an interest in becoming more closely involved in the security assistance. The most realistic option for this, with least risk of exacerbating regional competition, would be for the regional powers to contribute to fiscal support of the Afghan government for ANSF funding. In this sense it is important that regional powers recognise that the challenge of maintaining stability in Afghanistan is as much a fiscal problem as a security one.

vii. Coping with an Unfavourable Outcome

If Afghanistan were to revert to civil war and break down of central government authority ensued, it would pose a new set of policy challenges to the regional powers akin to those they faced prior to 2001. Although the regional powers have a strong interest in seeing continuity and stability, in case of a civil war or north-south split, they would receive requests for support from faction leaders in the north of the country. This would most likely take the form of a return to the position of 1996-1998 and the northern faction leaders would offer to align themselves with interests of the regional powers to contain the security threat posed by the resurgent Taliban and their international militant allies. Such a situation would be highly unpredictable and the past would provide an unreliable guide to developments. However, in this case regional powers would most likely seek to limit their engagement, while trying to design a containment strategy.

A more likely invidious scenario to be faced by regional policy makers as well as the international partners of Afghanistan, would be one of troublesome continuity.

The low intensity conflict scenario could deliver continuity and stability, but with a government and allied strong men failing to abide by international norms. With the departure of international troops state security forces may become more aggressive and apt to use arbitrary violence and government may become less prone to respect ideas of pluralism or legality. By continuing their support of government, necessary for stability, regional powers and the United States will open themselves up to accusations of being accomplices to human rights violations.

6. Conclusion

The interests of the regional powers in post-2014 Afghanistan are broadly compatible, regardless of whether the “worst-case” or more favourable scenarios govern developments within the country. Those predicting a new “great game” of regional competition, played out in Afghanistan, are likely to be disappointed, because none of the neighbours has a strong enough incentive to enter the fray competitively.

Beyond 2014, Afghanistan is likely to matter more for the regional powers than for the US, at least in terms of the risks of spill-over effects from continuing instability in the country.

However, only the United States has shown interest in providing the kind of fiscal subsidy required to prop up the Afghan state beyond 2014. Afghanistan's fiscal dependence on a power which has few long term interests in the country represents a threat to its neighbours, because if the US finally loses patience and pulls out, the neighbours suffer. The most viable approach to maintaining long term stability in Afghanistan will involve turning it from a security problem into a banking problem; and from a largely US-led project into a more regionally supported project.

The end of the period of direct US intervention in Afghanistan is an opportune moment for the regional powers to reflect on what has been learnt about the nature of the threats and opportunities emanating from the country.

The threats from post-2014 will be more real than the opportunities, but these threats will be more mundane and less existential than the threats the US believed it faced in 2001. The US intervention was provoked by a military-ideological threat – the Al Qaeda menace, which for a while showed itself able to do real damage on the US homeland. Most of the likely spill-over to the regional powers from post-2014 conflict in Afghanistan is likely to relate to armed criminality, rather than coherently ideological violence. In the most plausible scenarios for Afghanistan's post-2014 development, the regional powers will need to contain threats to the rule of law rather than existential security threats. On the downside, they will find that the opportunities in Afghanistan are less attractive than the US heralded at various stages during its presence. The prospects for either a radical institutional and social transformation or an economic bonanza have been significantly exaggerated. The best hope for regional powers dealing with Afghanistan post-2014 will be to help contain problems arising from instability and conflict, encourage positive developments and avoid doing any harm.

One of the challenges for managing Afghanistan's regional relations post-2014 will be an asymmetry between the stakes of the five regional powers considered in this study and Pakistan's stake in the Afghan outcome.

An unfavourable outcome in Afghanistan is likely to be far more costly for Pakistan than for any of the five other regional powers. However, neither the Afghan government, nor the regional powers, is likely to favour any idea of ceding Pakistan a greatly enhanced role in stabilising Afghanistan. Maintaining a cooperative regional approach which embraces Pakistan will be an ongoing challenge.

An ongoing conflict features in all the likely Afghan scenarios - and most of the threats which regional powers face from Afghanistan - relate to this conflict.

The powers have good reason to cooperate in support of conflict resolution and their efforts in support of peace will be a key part of their frame of reference for dealing with Afghanistan. However progress towards reducing violence in Afghanistan is likely to be achieved incrementally, over a period of years, helped by a broad range of sustained measures, rather than by a set-piece peace agreement. Nevertheless, effective regional cooperation can significantly contribute to the success of an Afghan peace process.

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