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AFGHANISTAN Volatile, Uncertain, But Hopeful

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There is considerable uncertainty about the stability of Afghanistan after the announced US and NATO withdrawal in 2014. What type of Western presence will remain and under what type of agreement? What impact will the external aid cuts have on Afghanistan's capacity for governance and its economic viability? Is political turbulence to be expected, considering the dismal record of the Karzai government's talks with the Taliban since 2011?

Emma Hooper, Project Director for the CIDOB project *Sources of Tension in Afghanistan & Pakistan: A Regional perspective*, firmly believes not only that the peace and stability of Afghanistan is vital for the region, but that this is something understood and shared by all the regional powers.

The region is defined by most as volatile and uncertainty is what many say will preside the transition phase to 2014 and beyond...

Volatile, uncertain, but hopeful: the region is currently in a state of flux as 2014 approaches. Change is coming, hence uncertainty. The US and NATO pull-out is generating a lot of positioning by the main regional powers (China, India, Pakistan, Iran and Russia), because all of them aim at maximizing their influence and minimizing any fall-out from upcoming changes. The main questions, though, remain so far unanswered: we do not know what US and NATO forces will be left behind (and for how long) and whether the Taliban will be a part of the Kabul government or not. Uncertainty therefore has to do with the governance and the economic sustainability of the Afghan state, and the forthcoming election results.

What are the main factors preventing the adequate development of the capacity of governance of the Afghan state?

The main factors are weak, under-developed institutions; the over-centralization of government (which inhibits local-level accountability); corruption; the lack of a revenue base other than foreign aid, and the lack of expenditure on development over the past ten years (which would have given local populations a say in governance and thus a stake in stability).

Why is the peace and stability of Afghanistan vital for the region?

Afghanistan is a crossroads: economically (legal and illegal trade routes) and security wise (it borders with Pakistan in the south and the east, Iran in the west, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the north, and China in the far north-east). Afghanistan is a proxy theatre in which regional confrontations play out, politically, ideologically and in terms of extension of spheres of regional influence (Pakistan vs. India, China vs. Russia, Iran vs. Saudi Arabia). It has always been this way. Definitely, lessons could have been better learned from the historical experiences of the British Empire in Afghanistan and indeed, more recently, from the former Soviet Union's experience there.

The Taliban are playing an increasingly central political role and are becoming an unavoidable factor for the future governance of the country. Do you see a potential national pact for stability after the upcoming presidential elections (due on 5 April 2014) to include Taliban constituents?

The Taliban are, of course, a central factor. It is very likely that they will be included, to some extent, in whatever government is formed after the elections. But we do not know to what extent. We do not know if there will be a national pact for stability.

What about the economic front? What are the economic implications of the US and NATO withdrawal?

One of the major problems of the Afghan economy is its foreign aid dependency: its lack of alternatives to aid money, other than opium production. Having no other sources of revenue, a surge in the drug economy in Afghanistan is to be expected after 2014. Another specifically Afghan economic problem comes from the structures of power (powerful warlords) supported by the US for the sake of expediency, which will now be faced with the drying up of their own sources of revenue and will thus stop delivering to their clientelist networks, so that less money will be circulating at the local level. China, Russia and India are certain to offer economic aid –but it will amount to much less than what Afghanistan is currently receiving.

What are the main regional challenges?

Security and stability –and economic growth. It is of paramount importance to ensure peace and stability in Afghanistan because of the spillover possibilities into Pakistan, Central Asia and Russia. It is crucial to prevent the growth of the drug economy and thus to establish sound foundations for the economic development of its Afghan epicentre. Finally, regional economic integration is increasingly a necessity in a context of uncertainty. All five main regional powers agree on this.

What is the perspective of these regional powers? What is their preferred outcome?

Regional powers may well exploit the situation to make geopolitical gains in influence, capture security and develop assistance, and/or clamp down on human rights. All five want stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan, which has changed stance over the past two years, now reportedly does not want a return to the 1990s and a Taliban Emirate, nor does it want to see a rise in domestic terrorism. In this sense, one of new Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's primary aims should be to build better

relations with India. Pakistan is supported by Saudi Arabia. The Saudi leadership has developed a strong interest in Afghanistan (which it has come to think of as the Kingdom's immediate neighbourhood) since the 1980s, when Saudi Arabia feared a Soviet advance towards the Arabian Sea and the Persian Gulf. But Afghanistan itself is not the core issue in Saudi Arabia's policy towards the country: it rather derives its importance for Riyadh from the fact that Saudi Arabia's relations with Pakistan and Iran are affected by events in Afghanistan. Pakistan is arguably Saudi Arabia's most important ally after the US, and Iran is seen as the main threat not only to the Saudi regional position in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, but also to the very survival of the Saudi regime. Riyadh is increasingly pursuing its aim to avoid a new civil war in Afghanistan and to help establish a government of national unity comprising at least parts of the Taliban, to keep Iran out of Kabul and to isolate al-Qaida in Pakistan.

What about China?

China wants peace and stability in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, in order to protect and develop its economic interests. Pakistan is, by far, the more important of the two countries for China: it is a nuclear-armed Muslim state, it is an energy corridor to the Gulf, and it is a long-standing ally (one of China's two main ones, along with North Korea). China will almost certainly push for greater regional co-operation (through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, currently grouping Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan). China also wants Afghanistan and Pakistan de-linked (as does Pakistan itself), and does not want to see any military operation occur that could affect Pakistan's sovereignty and independence. In the short and medium term, this means that China will probably support any decision by the Afghani people in terms of the shape of the country's future government. From the US perspective, it is more a question of *"anyone but the Taliban"*. From the Chinese perspective it is *"no matter who governs as long as he is not a spoiler"*. One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter, depending on who wins.

And Iran?

Iran wants to maintain its spheres of influence --economic and soft-power cultural (as in the Farsi-speaking Herat region). In general, the Iranian approach has been the political equivalent of guerrilla tactics: to gain and wield influence but not to hold territory --that is, not to bear responsibility for the politics and the policies of the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan. Part of this approach is also to have the means and the kind of presence to deny the enemy control of territory. In this respect, Iran has been trying both to make sure the US does not have a comfortable writ in Afghanistan and, simultaneously, to sway the Karzai government its way. Iran wants to be a player, and to be recognized as such, but one step removed from the kind of control that entails responsibility. Put more starkly, Iran's long term objective of having stable neighbours with whom it carries out mutually profitable exchanges is in conflict with its short term aim of ejecting the US presence from those very neighbours.

Russia too wants security and stability?

Yes indeed --and no spillover into Central Asia. The drug economy, while important, is secondary in this regard. Recent perspectives from Russia indicate that a deeper involvement in Afghanistan is now considered not only necessary, but inevitable given the security concerns that continued, and even increased instability in Afghanistan, combined with the prevalence of radical Islamist forces, would

entail. The frequent calls to revert to the original mandate of the international community (a positive mandate focused on political, economic, social and cultural elements of stability and peaceful development) indicate the direction in which Russia conceives its role in the future of Afghanistan. A very strong insistence on the collective nature of the endeavour (which, to succeed, will have to include the widest possible number of countries) is also revealing of an awareness of the limits, both economic and political, that a Russian role would encounter. Russia claims an important role, but is well aware that it will not be able to play a leading one. Its approach is thus thoroughly regional, with a growing focus on regional multilateralism. Of extreme significance is the strong emphasis placed on the essential, central role of Pakistan for the solution of the Afghan question.

What is the perspective of the Central Asian republics?

Back in 2001 (the date of the US and NATO intervention in Afghanistan), the Central Asian republics were a logistical hub. But this is a volatile region in itself: recent ethnic clashes in Osh in South Kyrgyzstan (2012); military operations in Rasht, Eastern Tajikistan against ex civil war commanders and alleged extremists spilled over from Afghanistan (2008-2011); also in Tajikistan, recent military operations against community leaders (2012). The spillover, so far, has been limited, but it could be otherwise after 2014. The pullout heralds a new period of uncertainty: “reverse transit” fears include the proliferation of small weapons, illegal drugs, expansion of extremist groups. Direct spillovers would be more small-scale, localised conflicts, but also socio-economic stress, due to the return of labour migrants, and possible destabilization, as a result of political succession in any of the post-Soviet Central Asian republics.

Pakistan’s evolution is really the key to stability in the region?

There is currently a wave of optimism in Pakistan, after Nawaz Sharif’s election win in May 2013, comparable to that which greeted Obama’s first term in the US. The question is: can he deliver? Economic problems are paramount. In foreign policy, it is significant that his first outreach was to India (even though Karzai had invited him first). Sharif has to face issues such as that of the Durand Line border with Afghanistan, the Pashtun independence movement, the inflow of refugees from Afghanistan, Pakistan’s support for the Afghan Taliban, the challenge of the domestic Taliban (particularly strong if the Taliban come to power in Kabul), and India’s growing interest in Afghanistan. Of course, from a US perspective, Pakistan, troubled as it is both by domestic instability and terrorism, is simultaneously both a formal ally and an obstacle for peace. But over the past few months, Pakistan has taken steps to facilitate talks with the Taliban and broaden its relations with Afghan political actors beyond the Taliban. And the fact that Sharif is a good businessman (and a Punjabi) certainly offers some comfort. If he is able to overcome historical distrust, recognizing India’s contribution to the future development of Afghanistan, for instance, he is likely to show greater cooperation with Afghanistan and the US on border security. But the question remains of whether the army will allow him to do the job? In my view, yes it will. But an equally important point is whether Pakistan has a road map for this: as yet there is no comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy in Pakistan. The questions that only time will answer are: Is Sharif up to it? Has he matured as a politician (he was charged with corruption in 1999 after General Pervez Musharraf’s coup and had to flee the country)? Does he run the risk of retaining too much power for himself (he already heads three ministries)? In these respects, the situation reminds one of Obama’s first term: a lot of hope has been generated, it is a matter of whether positive change follows.

And what do the international players have to say?

For the US and NATO, the challenge is how to extract themselves with the least political cost and with the minimum left behind on the ground, whilst not giving the appearance of retreating in failure – which is how the Taliban are likely to portray the withdrawal.