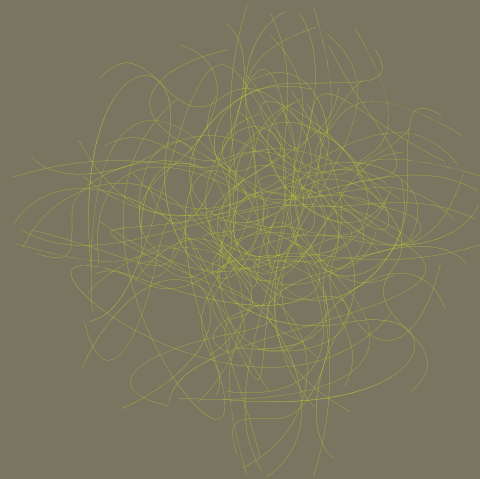


**Sources of Tension
in Afghanistan and
Pakistan: A Regional
Perspective**

**Perspectives
from the Region
in 2013:**

5. AFGHANISTAN

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Introduction

In line with the focus for 2013 under CIDOB's "Sources of Tension in Afghanistan and Pakistan: Regional Perspectives (STAP RP)" policy research project on the regional powers and their interests, this series is a product of field research visits to a number of the key regional powers identified in the 2012 Mapping Document <http://www.cidobafpakproject.com/> by the STAP RP project team.

Understanding the perspectives of the five main regional powers with an interest in outcomes in Afghanistan and Pakistan is a critical element in relation to this volatile region, which is currently in a state of flux as 2014 approaches. Identification of opportunities for dialogue, peace building, improved bilateral relationships and the development of regional organizations as mechanisms for dialogue, as well as examining how the regional powers see Afghanistan and Pakistan from a broader geopolitical and foreign policy perspective are key elements in enhancing this understanding.

This report is a product of STAP RP consultations with individuals and institutions held in Kabul, Afghanistan in October 2013. It is jointly authored by Malaiz Daud and Gabriel Reyes Leguen (CIDOB). A list of those consulted is at the end of this report.

While many experts contributed to the findings presented, the final responsibility for the content is that of CIDOB alone.

I. Background

With the date for the total removal of foreign troops from Afghanistan drawing closer, the sense of despondency in western capitals could not be greater as far as the fate of the country is concerned.

The general line of narrative runs as follows: the Afghan state is embattled and corrupt and will collapse because it has no way of withstanding a Taliban offensive.

Or it will at the very least lose most of the countryside together with major cities in the South and Southeast of the country. It may hold on to Kabul as long as there is a residual presence of foreign troops post-2014. Therefore, it is futile to invest in any way in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Pakistan is seen as becoming increasingly vulnerable, with its economy in a freefall, battling a war against Islamist terrorists – and clearly not winning; has a weak civilian government, an army that may or may not have control over its nuclear arsenal, an insurgency raging in the mineral-rich province of Balochistan and a population that is increasingly becoming anti-Western. Therefore, diverting attention to Pakistan seems to be the next logical step in addressing the global terrorism conundrum.

Furthermore, the patience of western electorates is wearing thin and politicians are walking on wafer-thin ice in justifying presence of their troops in Afghanistan and committing further financial resources. The western media has not helped either, as the gloom and doom picture it consistently paints hardly makes a case for continued presence - or even support to - Afghanistan.

This rather unsavory picture justifies the need to take a closer look at the developments in Afghanistan, to generate a deeper understanding of what direction the country is going to take post-2014, based on the current ground realities. Therefore, in order to seek stakeholder feedback on likely future scenarios for Afghanistan in 2014 and beyond; to share findings from Phases 2 and 3 of CIDOB's STAP RP; and to see to what extent they have or have not changed in the past 12 months, a STAP RP project team visited Afghanistan in October 2013.

The timing of the trip was significant, as it coincided with the last three days of nominations for the 2014 presidential election. The team held meetings with people either directly involved in, or closely following, the building of electoral coalitions, as well as politicians, civil society representatives, youth, political commentators and foreign envoys and diplomats.

This report contains the findings from these meetings, as shared by the interlocutors interviewed.

II. The Consolidation of Politics: A Legitimate Means to Channel Power

While Afghanistan's recent past has by and large been characterized by violent contestation of power in its different manifestations and with both external and internal influences, recent conversations in Kabul seem to indicate that there is evidently and largely a shift from violent contestation of power towards more peaceful ways of acquisition of it. Of the people interviewed for this report, not a single person could foresee a relapse into an all-out war, as was the case from 1977 until the fall of Taliban in 2001¹.

It is generally believed that Afghan political leaders have more interest in peace than war. The current crop of leaders from different political groups, ethnic backgrounds, social and civil networks and religious tendencies have had a taste of the dividends of relative peace in the past 12 years. They have prospered economically², have not had to risk being executed, exiled or to have had their families face the risk of extermination with them – their offspring, instead, are now some of the best educated in the country³.

The Taliban have systematically targeted the Afghan leadership on different levels nonetheless, which is a constant reminder that it could be even worse if everyone turned on each other once again.

However, as some interlocutors pointed out, it is worth noting that resorting to violent means to secure new or preserve current economic interests, social status or access to power, is still perceived as legitimate by some actors and should not be discarded. But most agreed that violence would be used only as a last resort, after all other options have been exhausted. Most interlocutors stressed that the emphasis is squarely on politics right now. In closed quarters, an overwhelming majority have steadfastly affirmed to stand behind the current state of affairs or *Nizam*⁴.

This strategy has manifested itself in a set of actions and related institutional arrangements. Elections are viewed as a means to acquire power. Contesting elections is therefore the mainstay of all the major camps currently represented in the Afghan government, the opposition groups and those falling in the wider realm of the *Nizam*⁵, with the exception of the Taliban⁶ and the *Hizb-e-Islami*, who see elections as the main rule of the game in the longer run, but shun them based on the current constitutional framework.

In the context of next year's presidential election, a number of surprising alliances have been forged.

Two tickets stand out: Dr. Abdullah Abdullah and Dr. Ashraf Ghani have both taken on board unlikely running mates. The former is a joint candidate of *Hizb-e-Islami*, *Jamiat-e-Islami* and *Wahdat-e-Islami (Mohaqeq)*. *Hizb-e-Islami* and *Jamiat-e-Islami*, as the most powerful, *mujahideen* parties, were always at loggerheads with each other during the war against the Soviet forces. Their enmity broke out in an all out civil war from 1992 until 1996, killing estimated 65,000 Kabulis alone and leaving much of the city in ruins. The ticket is rumored to have gotten the

1. Uppsala University considers a conflict with 1000 battle-related deaths war. However, the notion here entail two phenomena: a) a conflict fierce enough to pose an existential threat to the state and b) violence that would result in deaths of tens of thousands of people, destruction of entire population centers and control of different parts of the country by different groups.
2. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2013/jun/28/afghanistan-new-rich-in-pictures#?picture=411629003&index=8>
3. <http://world.time.com/2012/08/13/afghanistans-princelings-are-the-children-of-the-mujahedin-ready-to-rule/>
4. Loosely translated to "system" in English.
5. <http://unama.unmissions.org/Default.aspx?ctl=Details&tabid=12254&mid=15756&ItemID=35846>
6. http://worldnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/10/25/21156162-taliban-we-will-boycott-elections-until-us-leaves-afghanistan

blowing of its banned founder and leader, Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, despite his public denouncements of the election.

Dr. Ghani, on the other hand, has the support of General Abdul Rashid Dostum, a former Uzbek warlord, who has a solid voter bank. Dr. Ghani called General Dostum “a known killer”⁷ immediately after President Hamid Karzai allowed Dostum to return to Afghanistan in 2009 to boost his votes. It seems the bad blood has been superseded by *realpolitik* and the technocrat and the former warlord are now running on the same ticket. This kind of pre-election activity has given some hope to the Afghan elite, but how exactly it resonates with Afghans in general is a question no one seems to have an answer for yet.

Another key factor in exerting pressure on the Afghan political leaders to tone down egos to a certain extent is the fact that the democratic space created in the past 12 years has resulted in mushrooming of a number of civil society organizations, youth and women networks and associations, student bodies, TV and radio stations, educational institutes and sports clubs, which Kenneth Katzman calls “*emerging power centers*” in a recent report for the U.S. Congress⁸. These bodies and prominent figures of Afghan civil society constitute an integral part of the polity. They are either directly or indirectly involved in shaping politics of the country⁹. Their existence and nurturing is in large part due to a democratic discourse that is espoused in Afghanistan’s constitution. Any alteration or threat to their existence faces fierce scrutiny and resistance. There is also a more expansive urban population now, which some interlocutors believed was close to 50 percent – Afghanistan’s urban population is projected to hit 29% mark by 2025¹⁰ though – and a new generation of leaders, commentators and opinion-makers whose survival and relevance is directly related to the size of the democratic space available. In that, they are already making efforts to arrest and reverse any potential attempts at shrinking this space. These actors are fully conscious of the importance of the current transition and the upcoming presidential election, which is perceived as a litmus test that has pushed many of them move from the margins of politics to be actively involved in campaigns in support of specific presidential candidates

Despite the cautious optimism, however, there are also some real threats and risks as acknowledged by most Afghan interlocutors.

All unanimously agreed the presidential election will pose a challenge of great proportions, before, during and after the vote. As research suggests, elections in post-war settings can be extremely divisive, creating losers and winners.¹¹ There is no guarantee that those on the losing end of next year’s election will not contest the result, especially, if the election is rigged, which by all accounts seems to be the likeliest scenario. Should there be rigging, it will probably be on a massive scale according to some interlocutors, who also believe that those who would rig smartly will win the day. There is also the fear and the possibility that the least optimal candidate may win, jeopardizing Afghanistan’s relations with its closest allies mainly the USA and EU countries. The international community will also face a difficult dilemma should the outcome of a free and fair electoral process empower a president with a questionable human rights record, past links with terrorist networks or anti-western rhetoric and background.

7. <http://wayback.archive.org/web/20110531154225/http://ashrafghani.af/campaign/archives/1221>
8. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RS21922.pdf> page 22
9. http://www.counterpart.org/images/uploads/CPI12028_IPACS_FIN_lowres.pdf
10. <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/unup/p2k0data.asp>
11. Collier, Paul (2009-01-23). Wars, Guns, and Votes: Democracy in Dangerous Places. HarperCollins e-books. Kindle Edition.

On the other hand, a fraudulent vote will not only have internal implications, it will surely result in tense if not broken relations between the newly elected president and some members of the international community. This would in turn put at risk the future of international financial support to Kabul: (see below). In the light of an imperfect process and end result, it would be difficult to anticipate what will have the greatest weight for the international community, when assessing a future position based on the upcoming election, the process or the end result.

In addition, as previously pointed out and stressed by various interlocutors, whilst an all-out war is not seen by the main actors as beneficial, they will still – as they are doing at present – use violence extensively and expansively against rivals and the less powerful, to exert themselves - both before and after the election. For instance, Atta Mohammad Noor, Balkh Governor, is very likely to fight to keep his current position, for one, to have shares in every business venture that is based in Balkh that will in turn serve to consolidate his political position.¹² The media will still remain reluctant to take on high political figures such as the first vice president, Qaseem Faheem, Kandahar police chief, Abdul Raziq or General Dostum. Recently, a journalist was beaten up in public in the heart of Kabul by the governor of Parwan province. While these and many more risks and threats are part of daily conversations on the election, Afghans still remain –surprisingly in some ways - very optimistic about the first peaceful and democratic transition of political power from Karzai to his successor.

Interestingly enough, even the Taliban leadership is seen to be keen on becoming part of a political process, weary of years in hiding and obscurity and essentially being captives of Pakistani army along with their families¹³. The main leadership of the Quetta *Shura* has indicated both in public and private that they cannot - and do not want to - continue waging the violent campaign and seem to be trying to get the best bargain; and so is the case with *Hizb-e-Islami's* Hikmatyar. While the Taliban leadership is considered pragmatist, a major reason for their inclination to pursue their goals through politics is also due to their reportedly being at the mercy of the Pakistani security apparatus. Recent experience shows that, should the Taliban try to exercise independence, there is a high risk of them being put behind bars, like Taliban No. 2, Mullah Baradar, whose recent release at the request of Afghan government is being currently challenged by a court in Pakistan. Also, as emphasised by one interlocutor in Kabul, the Taliban are unsure of their ability to do well in elections. They are therefore increasingly using a violent campaign as a bargaining chip that would allow them to negotiate from a position of strength, which could in turn ensure the biggest possible share of power regardless of the electoral process.

Beyond the specifics of the political battle, Afghanistan faces a broader and deeper battle of narratives and visions.

From a historical perspective, the greatest challenge for the Afghan polity has been to accommodate both modernist and traditional forces. Against the backdrop of a century-old struggle between the two, there is a reason to believe the trend may hamper the democratic process

12. <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/under-attas-shadow-political-life-in-the-afghan-north>

13. <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-evolving-taliban-changes-in-the-insurgency-dna>

more than anything else¹⁴. Conservative forces within the government, former *mujahideen*, *mullahs* (both pro and anti-government), Taliban, radical groups such as *Hizb-e-Tahrir* and religious seminaries such as *Khatam-al Nabyeen* (Iranian-funded)¹⁵ and another Saudi-funded one (reportedly budgeted at US\$ 100 million) will compete with former left-leaning forces, loyalists of former King Zahir Shah, newly-established womens' groups and free media outlets, for the political and social space. The competition is already intense, with attempts by conservatives to curb newly-found freedoms such as TV programs, women's participation in public sphere and freedom of speech. For example, as pointed out by one of the interviewees, the conservatives would never allow a woman or a non-Muslim to become the head of state. As Dr. Ashraf Ghani comments in his recent article for BBC Pashto, *Afghanistan has an unfinished chapter of modernism that was initiated by a former reformist king in early 21st century. This chapter has been revisited numerous times over the course of the past century, each time failing to complete it.*¹⁶

All in all, and despite the numerous challenges ahead, recent discussions with Afghan interlocutors show that there is a great deal of optimism on the part of Afghans themselves, as opposed to the negative press their country is getting in the Western media.

This optimism stems from changing social and political demographics and dynamics such as consolidation of politics, rapid urbanization, and a sense of goodwill towards the international community. 71% of Afghans have a favorable view of the international community, according to a recent Asia Foundation survey,¹⁷ as opposed to 74% of Pakistanis who see America as their enemy according to a Pew survey¹⁸ in the same year. Factors such as the emergence of a new generation of leaders, involvement of youth, women and other marginalized groups in one form or another in social and political activities and a broadly-shared distaste for any reversal of all these achievements, mean that any support to Taliban is regarded as doing exactly that.

III. Aid Withdrawal: Mixed Implications and Perceptions

"First day, the friend; second day, the bystander; third day, the one to blame" (an interviewee)

It is very obvious that the issue of dwindling finances accompanying the drawdown of military forces has not really sunk in to the collective Afghan psyche. Many Afghans still believe the funding will not be slashed or most certainly will not be stopped altogether. Those who are dealing with the issue inside the Afghan government stated they had already felt the heat. At one point this year, the Afghan government was virtually on the verge of a total shut down due to lack of funds. According to some interlocutors, international donors have apparently adopted a "wait and see" policy until the result of the upcoming presidential election is clear, putting on hold a significant part of previously agreed commitments and/or further disbursements. Some of the interlocutors interviewed warned about the dwindling of international funding and the risks of a fast withdrawal of funds, both at the macro (state budget and sustainability) and micro (work of NGOs and local communities, unemployment) levels.

14. http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2013/02/20130111Ruttig-How_It_All_Began_FINAL.pdf
15. http://www.rferl.org/content/Controversial_Madrasah_Builds_Irans_Influence_In_Kabul/2212566.html
16. http://www.bbc.co.uk/pashto/interactivity/2013/08/130827_as_ashraf_ghani_column.shtml
17. <http://asiafoundation.org/resources/pdfs/Surveybook2012web1.pdf> page 86
18. <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/06/27/pakistani-public-opinion-ever-more-critical-of-u-s/>

The Afghan government has already taken steps to find alternative sources of income. Just recently, it announced a package aimed at stimulating investment.¹⁹ As is evident from the past, continuation or cessation of funding will decide the fate of the Afghan state. The last time it happened the state only lasted four months. *"In 1991, four months after Soviet aid stopped, the Afghan government collapsed under mujahidin pressure,"*²⁰ David G. Fivecoat writes. However, rampant corruption in the Afghan government, civil society and private sector is making it harder than ever to persuade the donors to commit further monetary resources.

According to various interlocutors, the presence of large amounts of funds is partly considered as a reason for pervasive corruption, even conflict. Talk of corruption is all around, and it is not perceived as an exclusively Afghan issue. It is seen by interlocutors as a menace not only eroding the Afghan state from inside, but also taking a toll on the relationship between the Afghan government and its international partners. It is even considered to be fueling conflict in some parts of the country. While there is evidence that international funding has benefited insurgents in some parts of the country, not only through extortion, but also via doubtful legal means via development and security contracts, countries like Iran have also reportedly tapped into this²¹. The latest quarterly report of Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR)²² stipulates that the American army has declined to suspend contracts of 43 companies that have ties to the Taliban and Al Qaeda. It is also said that the conflict in Wardak province is in part due to international funding, as different criminal groups and networks are vying for their share. Consequently, according to some interlocutors, as soon as the funding dries up, these groups and networks will diminish or, at least, weaken considerably. In that sense, some believe that the decrease of international funding and projects could, therefore, represent an opportunity, provided the funding does not dry up completely and abruptly and that the remaining funding is channeled intelligently and in line with identified priorities.

However, this triggers a set of key questions: if the international funding dries up, what would its beneficiaries resort to, the illicit economy, such as the drug trade? How will the impending unemployment affect the standing of the government in the society? What would its implications be for the insurgency? Most interlocutors had no real answers to these complex issues, which depend on many variables. But many anticipated that unemployment will be a serious and predictable consequence of the reduction of international funding - a phenomenon which could have dire consequences across the country. According to one account, upon the recent closing down of a single USAID project, a thousand skilled workers were made redundant. Similar stories from different parts of the country are also reportedly coming in. Yet, there is little insight into what the implications of this increase of unemployment would be, nor how the Afghan government would deal with it.

There were also no clear answers in regards to the future of poppy cultivation and narco-trafficking – an issue of great concern, especially in the light of future decrease of income in the provinces, which could trigger a spike in production and trade to compensate other losses. For many, it seems like an age ago that this issue was an extremely important one for the international community. Even though both the international community and the Afghan government are aware of established links between

19. <http://www.khaama.com/afghanistan-unveils-new-incentives-policies-to-attract-investment-2264>

20. <http://strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pubs/parameters/Articles/2012summer/Fivecoat.pdf> page 1

21. <http://www.military.com/daily-news/2013/02/12/us-afghanistan-aid-may-be-helping-iran.html>

22. <http://www.sigar.mil/pdf/quarterlyreports/2013-10-30qr.pdf> page 10

Taliban and drug trade, the issue has nosedived right to the bottom of priorities list. According to an UNODC report on opium, “during the past four years (2005-2008) the Taliban have made \$450-600 million in total from taxing opium cultivation and trade in Afghanistan”²³. Opium yield is expected to increase this year, UNODC reported recently²⁴. This begs the question whether criminal groups will increasingly become involved in the illicit economy, further exacerbating the security situation.

As for the legal economy, some interlocutors mentioned what looked on the face of it to be unrealistic expectations of generating internal revenues and becoming self-sustaining in the near future.

The Afghan government is hoping to generate massive revenues from the mining sector by 2017-18. This is against the backdrop of recent demands by two of its main mining contractors, a consortium of Indian companies led by the Steel Authority of India²⁵ and China’s China Metallurgical Group Corporation (CMGCC)²⁶, that their contracts be renegotiated. The proposition also ignores the capacity of the Afghan government to manage its mining sector and provide oversight to the projects. Recent reports from the Ministry of Finance suggest that there is a great deal of volatility in the revenues of the Afghan government. There was a downward trajectory before an upward one this quarter. Capital flight is a huge issue that is indicative of mistrust of investors in the stability of the market. The key to ensuring economic stability would be safeguarding investments, especially of the domestic investors who are wary of the consequences of pending drawdown of the international forces.

This leaves international funding as the only reliable sources of subsidy for the Afghan state. The chances of sustaining the current Afghan state without a sustained external financial support are extremely slim. The Afghan government is aware of this, which is why President Karzai has repeatedly asked for funding for another 10 years until 2024, promising the state will then provide for itself.²⁷ On the other hand, the international community is extremely frustrated by the misuse of its taxpayers’ money. Therefore, it is implementing a much stricter regime of conditionality (essentially based on the fight against corruption), which was formally articulated in what has been known as the Mutual Accountability Framework adopted during the Tokyo Conference in July 2012. Some are also concerned part of the “progress” made in terms of democratic development may be reversed, with women being feared to be the most adversely affected.

However, the most important indicator for the international community to see that democratic principles are respected, is next year’s presidential election.

According to Afghan government insiders, there is a halt in both negotiations and partially in the disbursements of funds. There are indications that donors have expressed their desire to take up further funding negotiations after next year’s election. However, the international community has not yet made up its mind whether the process or result or both are the most important conditions for them. Will they keep funding a government with a president with past Al Qaeda links elected through a relatively free, fair and transparent election should this be the result of the upcoming election? Or will they sweep under the carpet electoral shortcomings as long as their preferred choice wins?

23. http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/Afghanistan/Afghan_Opium_Trade_2009_web.pdf page 3
24. http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan/ORAS_report_2013_phase12.pdf
25. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/10/29/us-afghanistan-mines-idUSBRE99508J20131029>
26. <http://integritywatchafghanistan.blogspot.de/>
27. <http://www.isaf.nato.int/article/bonn-conference/transcript-of-president-karzais-statement-at-the-bonn-conference.html>

Others have adopted a more institutional approach to funding. For example, the European Union is working with the Afghan government based on a ten-year framework, meaning they will support the current government and any future ones unless there are major issues regardless of who wins next year's election.

There could be further impediments in the process. One of the major issues is the existing and pervasive environment of mutual mistrust between Afghans (both the government and civil society), and the international community. Fingers are pointed and blame is cast on one another for the current state of play of corruption in the country and the negative figures that accompany this phenomenon.

The apparent view of Afghans is that, without a level of complacency and/or complicity within the donor community, it is inconceivable that the recipient could commit corruption of the mammoth magnitude witnessed in the recent past. Military contracts are seen by many interviewees as the biggest drivers of corruption with documented involvement of the international forces. The international community, on the other hand, sees its Afghan partners as intrinsically corrupt but still unthankful for the help they have received. They see President Karzai's assertions in this regards as mere "rants" that are severely damaging the partnership.

It is, nonetheless, interesting to see that Karzai is not the only one on the Afghan side harboring this perception, Afghans within and outside the government and from different levels of the civil service and society at large have come to the conclusion that the international community is as much to blame as the Afghan government when it comes to corruption. High level government officials affirm that Afghanistan has implemented most of the recommendations of the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework; whereas, the international community is yet to do its part. The latter professes exactly the opposite. Unless, there is a better mechanism so that a permanent solution to this "blame game" can be found, the issue may come back to haunt both sides before and after the transition process is completed.

Despite all the allegations and strains, ironically, Afghans still manage to persuade the international community for more funds. Thanks to the unprecedented presence of foreign entities, it seems a number of organizations and individuals have mastered the art of fundraising well enough to keep the taps running. Now, this skill coupled with steps to address the threat of corruption may come handy in the coming years unless the international community, spearheaded by the United States, finds it financially unviable or strategically irrelevant to continue the funding.

The complete loss or insufficient levels of funding will be the biggest blow to the current Afghan state.

Historically, Afghan states have always fallen as soon as they have been deprived of their sources of funding. Will a stateless land bode well for the region and globe is a major dilemma facing the international community. For Afghan elite, that is a doomsday scenario. Many caution that any decision on this needs to be made with due diligence.

IV. Security: Progress and Challenges

“During the presence of the Soviet troops, I commanded 120 armed men. After the withdrawal of the Soviet forces, I could hardly muster 37 people – people had lost the motivation to fight” (an interviewee)

There is a growing confidence in the capacity of Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) amongst Afghans. The security transition has formally been completed and at least on paper, the ANSF is in charge now. Indeed, the latest semi-annual report of Pentagon to Congress claims:

“During the reporting period, the ANSF has performed effectively in the field losing no major bases or district centers to the insurgency and protecting the majority of the Afghan population. Although challenges remain, the ANSF demonstrated an increasing level of effectiveness. The ANSF led almost 90 percent of operations by the end of the reporting period and is already in the lead for security in areas covering nearly 90 percent of the Afghan population. The ANSF has incrementally increased its capability to plan, conduct and sustain large - scale joint operations. One example of this was Operation KALAK HODE VI in Regional Command – South (RC-S). This 10,000-person joint operation, which focused on disrupting the insurgency, involved coordination among the Afghan Army, Police, Border Police and National Directorate of Security. The ANSF principally planned, led and manned the operation; Afghan-managed logistics and supply channels supported it.”²⁸

The ANSF still has air support from the international forces through which it has a pivotal advantage on the battlefield. The overriding perception in Kabul is that the The ANSF grows in strength every single day. An example of this are accounts from people who have recently travelled on the Kabul-Kandahar highway, who indicate that security has improved along the way, and that this has grown with the increased role of the ANSF. Others think it is also because Afghan Taliban do not want to risk running into long-term feuds with fellow Afghans who are members of the ANSF so they refrain from attacking the ANSF. Most of the attacks on the latter are considered the work of foreign fighters, especially (reportedly) Pakistanis from Punjab. The important point, however, is that there is a greater sense of reliance on, and the reliability of the ANSF.

The most significant development in this regard, is that elite, from the political leadership to civil society members, to business community, to notable women and youth, are pursuing the same goal: that of maintaining and further strengthening the ANSF.

There have been high profile public campaigns aimed at boosting the morale of the ANSF and celebrating their sacrifices. According to Ashraf Ghani, this is the first time in Afghanistan’s contemporary history that the elite are unequivocally supporting the security forces of the country. He further considers that survival of the current state is not as dependent on the strength of the ANSF, as it is on the support the political clique extends to it. In the same vein, Abdul Rab Rasool Sayyaf, a prominent *Jihadi* leader and professor of Islamic studies, has recently urged all Afghans to back their security forces as they are fighting for their country and religion.

28. http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Section_1230_Report_July_2013.pdf pages 2-3

In terms of numbers, ANSF has swollen swiftly. There are still lingering questions about the quality of the force. According to Pentagon's report, the "ANSF has grown to approximately 96 percent of its authorized end-strength of 352,000 personnel".²⁹ On the other hand, the international media has picked on the weaknesses of the ANSF every now and then.

However, a number of Afghan and international military officials contest those accounts. As pointed out by some analysts, it is actually doing a commendable job. A new generation of officers has come through ranks and is highly likely to assume key leadership roles in future. There are even concerns on the part of these officers that the civilian side is not keeping up with their progress, thus, severely denting their achievements on the battleground. A key contribution of the international community in this regard has not only been training Afghan forces inside Afghanistan, but also providing opportunities of higher education for a new crop of leaders in some of the best military institutions in their countries. President Karzai met one such group in the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst during his visit to the UK in late October 2013. There are about 50 Afghan cadets currently in some of Germany's best colleges. The return rate is very encouraging. The only real question here is opportunities or lack of them thereof for these officers. It is conceivable that another ten years of sustained partnership – if it happens as promised in the Chicago Summit 2012 – will lay a strong foundation for a resilient force, capable of operating independently.

The development of ANSF is, however, impeded by a number of factors, chiefly the risk of losing international financial support.

On the local level, the ANSF needs to improve considerably its record on human rights and tackling corruption within its ranks. There are still accusations of graft, misconduct and violations against the ANSF. Attrition still remains a problem. One in three soldiers desert the army as ANSF's casualties have soared. Corruption is still a major issue, especially, in the police. Political interference and allegiance to powerful figures rather than to state institutions is making it difficult to reform the forces as removing people is extremely hard. It also increases the likelihood of the force dividing in several factions to follow the lead of specific leaders.

But as pointed out earlier, the biggest threat to the survival and further development of the ANSF is lack of adequate financial resources. Here, the contribution of the international community is vitally important, as stressed by various interlocutors. Without international financial support for the foreseeable future, the ANSF will crumble without any doubt. This is an analysis shared by both Afghans and the international community and backed by historical events. In the aftermath of collapse of the Afghan army in 1991, only those components remained intact that still received material support from different sources, such as General Dostum's forces.

Contrary to public perception in the Western capitals, withdrawal of international military forces was seen by many Afghans as a positive step and an integral part of the ongoing partnership. It is even seen as a catalyst for decreased violence by some Afghan commentators. Some

29. http://www.defense.gov/pubs/Section_1230_Report_July_2013.pdf page 1

argue that with the international forces gone, the Taliban would lose their reason for existence or at least most of the motives and motivations to continue waging a war. One of the interviewees explained that in the wake of the withdrawal of the Soviet forces in late 1980s, the *muja-hideen* could hardly muster enough men to fight the then government. People were reluctant to join the struggle after complete withdrawal of the Soviet Army. This precedent makes some believe that the Taliban will face a similar fate and find it increasingly hard to mobilize manpower. Interestingly, there are some examples of this already. For instance, Pech Dara - infamously called "Valley of Death" by American military forces – in Kunar province has now been made accessible by the ANSF, a feat the international forces themselves struggled to achieve.

Hence, it is a sustained partnership with the international community that the leading Afghan security experts see as an adequate safeguard against miscreants rather than the presence of international military forces.

Yet, many also see a need for a continued, though limited, military support from Western troops in the short to medium-term as absolutely necessary.

Therefore, the ongoing debate over the future of the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) between the U.S. and Afghanistan dominates the discourse. The BSA is seen as crucial for ensuring continuity and keeping the neighboring countries, especially Pakistan, at bay: something that has become a sticking point in negotiations. President Karzai emphasizes that the Americans should act in support of Afghans, in the event attacks such as the periodic artillery shelling by the Pakistani forces against Afghanistan. The Americans reportedly disagree, which partly explains the delay in reaching an understanding.

The BSA is also more importantly considered to provide the framework for short and medium term support to the ANSF. The latter is in turn considered key for preventing the country from descending into a civil war.

Relapsing into the civil war is seen as a distant prospect within Afghanistan, because not only is there very little appetite for it, but also because the state capacities, both civilian and military, are believed to have grown adequately to prevent such an adverse and unlikely scenario. The positions of different political groups may also illustrate that civil war is not looming. There is however on the other hand, a widespread perception that the Taliban leadership is more inclined towards being part of a political settlement to avoid a civil war.

However, this does not mean there are and will be no detractors. The Haqqani network, because of the sheer interest it has in Pakistan (outweighing its interests in Afghanistan), can be a potential spoiler and may continue waging a violent campaign. Amongst other potential spoilers is another splinter group commanded by Mullah Najibullah who has openly challenged the decision of the Taliban leadership council to enter negotiations with the U.S. and the Afghan government.³⁰

Both entities are known for their close ties with the Pakistani ISI, which is pointing to Pakistan's position vis-à-vis the future of conflict

30. <http://mag.newsweek.com/2013/08/30/mullah-najibullah-too-radical-for-the-taliban.html>

in Afghanistan. With cracks appearing in the Taliban movement and efforts by Pakistan to “change its DNA”,³¹ reaching a political settlement with the Quetta *Shura* – even if it has the blessing of the Peshawar *Shura* – may not be enough to quell the insurgency in its entirety.

Since Pakistan has a history of supporting, even establishing, insurgent groups in Afghanistan, its position will have a profound impact on the course of war. Pakistan taps into the pool of thousands of Afghan refugees who receive dozes of ideological and warfare training in its seminaries, who are then used as a surrogate force against its neighbors. However, Pakistan’s ability to support the Afghan insurgency beyond 2014 will depend on its internal dynamics. The unknowns are manifold: Will its faltering economy sustain the ambitious adventures of its army? What will be the balance of democratic forces vis-à-vis the army? These and a number of other factors will determine Pakistan’s future position with regards to Afghanistan and its neighbors.

V. Reconciliation: The Stalled Peace Talks, Spoilers and Detractors

In general, there is a lot of ambiguity surrounding the peace process, which suffers from serious structural flaws and malfunctions, as repeatedly pointed out by interviewees.

The Afghan political elite has failed to strike a consensus on key terms and definitions (talks for political settlement, reconciliation, reintegration, etc); the leading body, High Council for Peace (HCP) has received a great deal of criticism for its composition and performance to date; the integration program has been used by opportunists for milking financial perks, and provincial bodies of the HCP have had a mixed record of success. The body, both on national and sub-national levels, has become another source of jockeying for power amongst the power-holders.³² Afghanistan Analysts Network’s Thomas Ruttig notes in a recent interview that “it seems that the largest figures of ‘re-integrees’ were generated in peripheral provinces, and often, if not in their majority, the fighters were not Taliban, but Hezbis or members of other free-lance illegal armed groups, also including people linked to some of the organizers”.³³

Last but not least, there is still profound disagreement as to whether talks with Taliban should be pursued or not, in the first place.

Some argue that the time is not right for starting the talks as the government should begin the talks from a “position of strength”. Others believe Taliban have shown signs of exhaustion and that any tardiness at this point would be counterproductive. Women are reportedly earnestly concerned that the talks or an agreement would jeopardize their newfound civil liberties. Talk of conceding parts of the country, especially in the south and southeast, has created a furor - something former Afghan head of national intelligence Amrullah Saleh has called “the *Lebanon Scenario*”. Many believe this will essentially mean the informal and undeclared annexation of Afghan territory and subjugation of its populace to Pakistan.

31. <http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/the-evolving-taleban-changes-in-the-insurgencys-dna>

32. http://www.boell.org/downloads/hbs_CAP_CS_Beyond_AFG_2014.pdf pages 2-3

33. <http://www.irinnews.org/report/98154/afghan-reintegration-scheme-in-the-spotlight>

The debate has become very divisive as President Karzai strives to make headway in the process, calling the Taliban from time to time “*brothers*” – a term which has caught on, and which Karzai’s critics use sarcastically, when they refer to Taliban.

The peace process has also become a very contentious issue between the Afghan government and its international backers - the U.S. in particular, as pointed out by some Afghan and international analysts.

President Karzai has picked on the way the talks have been conducted by the Americans. The Taliban Doha Office fiasco has forged three perceptions on part of Afghans: first, that the Americans are extremely desperate and want a way out at any cost from the Afghanistan quagmire, even if it is at the cost of Afghans; second, that it is a Pakistani ploy³⁴ and the Americans are playing in the hands of Pakistan whose army is making empty assurances to them for managing Afghanistan beyond 2014 in a way that no threat will be posed to the West from the region; and third, that the Americans neither have an overall strategy in Afghanistan nor do they have one pertaining to the talks with Taliban, making blunders such as the ones in Doha all more likely.

The overwhelming conclusion and widespread perception is that the Americans are either misguided or treacherous – despite their investment in blood, sweat and money in the last 12 years.

The Afghan elite have realized that – in their view - there is a real risk of the process either being hijacked by the Pakistanis or marking the beginning of a return to the Taliban era. Both scenarios are equally odious for them. In that regard, their reactions can mainly be classified into two categories: (i) creating hurdles for the process; and (ii) advocating for a complete overhaul of the process. It was President Karzai’s protest that resulted in the closure of Taliban Doha office, thereby stalling the process. Furthermore, many Afghans with access to high level policy and decision-makers in the U.S. and Europe have reportedly campaigned vigorously against the process in its present shape. Setting a deadline for reaching a deal before the complete withdrawal of combat forces, further complicates matters. The insurgents can easily sit out the withdrawal. The Afghan government can also hope absence of foreign forces will take the steam out of the insurgency as there will be no ideological motivation left to continue fighting. Hammering out a deal under pressure may dent the sustainability of the settlement achieved. Consequently, in the views of many interlocutors, the process should be allowed to run its natural course. Many believe that until and unless all belligerent sides realize that there is no way they can achieve their goals on the battlefield, the process may yield little.

Conclusions³⁵

Understanding the situation in Afghanistan still remains a challenge for all implicated stakeholders. Neighbouring countries, regional powers, the international community - despite its lengthy presence in the country - and even Afghan politicians and observers alike, cannot neglect the complexity of Afghanistan, the long conflict and the current effort of peace and state-building.

34. Pakistani journalist Talat Hussain presented a detailed account of how the Doha Office was actually a Pakistani ploy in an article in the Express Tribune on June 20, 2013. Link here: <http://tribune.com.pk/story/565809/afghan-revelations-pakistan-us-secret-diplomacy-created-doha-roadmap/>

35. Conclusions by stakeholders interviewed are presented here as indicated. Conclusions on the policy implications for the international community are drawn from the CIDOB STAP RP team’s own analysis.

An overriding sentiment, bordering on frustration, noted amongst Afghan elite, is that their country does not get what they regard as a fair press in the foreign media. This perception explains a recent public and social media onslaught by many Afghans, trying to dispel the “doomsday” predictions for their country after the complete drawdown of the international military forces.

Such views were clearly expressed throughout the STAP RP visit to Kabul, exposing an entirely different analysis of current reality on the part of Afghan interviewees, which is far-removed from the prevailing narrative in Europe and the U.S. Notably, there is a greater urgency on the part of Afghans to make the current system work and to ensure continuity to the current constitutional framework/order.

In this effort, most of the Afghan elite appear to regard politics as the only way of accommodating each other’s interests, and whilst violence is unlikely to disappear in the near future, most stress that an all-out civil war is a highly unlikely scenario. This is what could be qualified as cautious optimism. Most are aware of the great challenges and threats ahead and the fragility of the current state of affairs in Afghanistan. This, however, does not mean utter hopelessness but a firm foundation to build upon.

The international community, on the other hand, is in a difficult position. Twelve years of intense engagement is far too long for their electoral cycles to digest. The economic burden of the Afghan campaign is also putting a strain on their commitments – present and future. Juggling the expectations of each individual country is making it extremely difficult to work from a joint platform. It is clear there will be different institutional and country-specific approaches to dealing with Afghanistan post-2014. It is also clear that the outcome of this process will have a significant impact on the future of the country. The result of the upcoming electoral process will in that sense determine to a great extent the nature of the international community’s engagement in Afghanistan in the near future.

List of Interviewees

H.E. Nils Haugstveit

Norwegian Ambassador to Afghanistan

Mr. Hamid Jalil

Deputy Minister of Urban Development of Afghanistan

Mr. Parwiz Kawa

Editor in Chief, 8Sobh Daily

H.E. Dr. Akram Khpolwak

Minister of Borders and Tribal Affairs of Afghanistan

Ms. Vigdis Kjelseth

Counselor, Royal Norwegian Embassy, Kabul

Mr. Nader Nadery

Director of Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

Mr. Asif Nang

Deputy Minister of Education of Afghanistan

H.E. Fazel Hadi Muslimyaar

Chairman of Senate of Afghanistan

Ms. Alice Plane

Political adviser, EUSR Office, Afghanistan

Mr. Daud Rahim

Director, National Area-based Development Program, Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development

Mr. Salem Shah

Afghanistan 1400 Movement

Mr. Mirwais Wardak

Managing Director, Peace Training and Research Organization

Ms. Emily Winterbotham

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