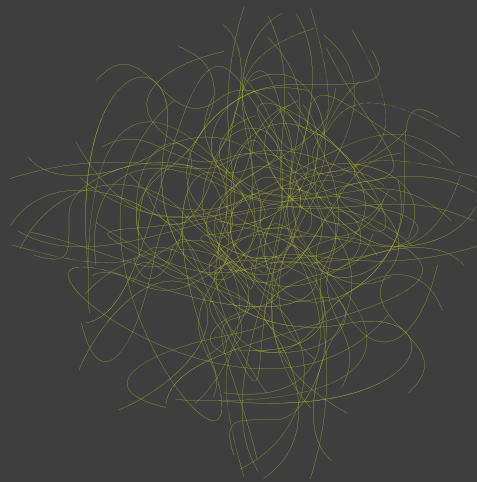


**Sources of Tension
in Afghanistan and
Pakistan: A Regional
Perspective**

**Afghanistan:
Overview of
Sources of
Tension with
Regional
Implications
2014**

Malaiz Daud

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AFGHANISTAN: OVERVIEW OF SOURCES OF TENSION WITH REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS 2014

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Introduction

2014 has been a crucial year not only for Afghanistan but also for the region. It seems Afghanistan's transition is, in a way, a transition for the whole region, with the regional powers eagerly following the developments in Afghanistan and reacting accordingly. This year, the region as a whole geared its efforts more and more towards ensuring stability in this war-ravaged country. This is especially true when it comes to Russia and China – in addition to India, obviously.

Right from the outset, there was clearly a sense of urgency in the region as the end of 2014 neared. While regional powers have had differences with the US over a number of international issues, response to the conflict in Afghanistan has thus far – with the exception of Iran – united the regional powers and the US and its allies. Regional powers are well aware of the fact that an unstable Afghanistan will pose a threat to the entire region – more than to the US and the West. Therefore, continued support to the Afghan state will be needed to fend off terrorist networks. While it is in their interest to have an Afghan state capable of neutralizing terrorist threats, the regional powers lack the financial resources to fund the Afghan security forces. In that, they are looking to the western countries to remain engaged in Afghanistan in the short to medium term, as is evident from some of President Vladimir Putin's statements.

On the other hand, with wars raging in Syria, Iraq and Pakistan along sectarian lines and the rise of the Islamic State (IS), the whole region is arguably in an unprecedented turmoil that also poses a global threat. Afghanistan has not experienced any sectarian violence so far, but could easily plunge into it, should one of the regional powers – especially Iran or Saudi Arabia – decide to open another front in the wider theatre of Shi'a-Sunni strife. However, the regional and international consensus for stability in Afghanistan, which is still intact, could also crumble as gaps are widening in other places, from Ukraine to Syria to Iraq.

Domestically, there was finally an end to the highly contested presidential election of Afghanistan. Despite the fact that John Kerry, the US Secretary of State, had managed to get Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah agree

to form the National Unity Government (NUG), disagreements persisted until an eleventh-hour intervention by the outgoing president, Hamid Karzai, who salvaged the power-sharing deal. Ghani was sworn in as the new president of the country; he subsequently signed a decree appointing Abdullah as the CEO of the newly-formed government.

As the electoral dispute dragged on, Afghanistan's economic woes became even graver. The Ministry of Finance announced numerous times throughout the year that the government would not be able to pay the salaries of public servants beyond the end of September. On the other hand, Taliban intensified their summer offensive. Several provinces in the North and Northeast saw rising levels of violence. The fighting in the southern Helmand Province continues to this day. The Afghan National Security Forces' losses have been at an all time high whilst the Taliban have resumed frontal wars and some splinter groups have already pledged allegiance to the IS. With its coffers empty and its economy in a freefall following the decline in the international financial support, the country is reeling. On the top of that, the contested presidential election and its contentious outcome have polarized the country more than ever in the post-Taliban era.

To conclude, the consensus in the region for a stable and peaceful Afghanistan is still intact. The regional mechanisms to achieve stability and continuation of the current Afghan statebuilding project are certainly more robust as all the regional powers in question (China, Russia, India, Iran and Saudi Arabia) have upped their efforts to fill the void that will be created by the complete withdrawal of the international combat forces from Afghanistan. Now that the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) has been signed between Afghanistan's new government and the US, the current Afghan state enjoys both regional and international guarantees and support – a blow to the Taliban plans for post-2014 Afghanistan¹.

1. Governance

1.1. The Presidential Election

Afghanistan's presidential election of 2014 shook the very foundations of the post-Taliban Afghan state. Its first round was hailed both in Afghanistan and abroad as a resounding success and a clear signal of defiance to the insurgency. However, the second round exposed the structural vulnerabilities of a fragile democracy that still heavily depends on the goodwill of individual leaders to survive.

Ultimately, first under pressure from Afghanistan's international allies and later from Afghan notables led by the outgoing president, Hamid Karzai, a national unity government deal was struck between the camps of former ministers, Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah. As per the agreement, Ghani was sworn in as the only second elected president of the country, whilst Abdullah was appointed as the Chief Executive Officer of the new government – a quasi-prime ministerial position. The cabinet slots will be almost equally divided between the two camps – 13 and 12 ministers will be introduced by President Ghani and Abdullah respectively.

1. See CIDOB STAP-RP Quarterly Monitoring Briefs for more detail: http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/stap_rp/quarterly_monitoring_briefs_afghanistan

As the Afghan election crisis dragged on, all the regional powers in question publically backed a peaceful and acceptable solution to the sides involved. However, many Kabul-based observers have confided to the author with a fair degree of certainty that there was a good level of covert interference from countries such as Iran in the electoral process, even before the impasse unraveled and therefore it is plausible there was a lot of behind the scene maneuvering. China and Saudi Arabia look the unlikeliest to have played an active role. India, Iran and Russia, on the other hand, were the more concerned parties. President Hamid Karzai's reported insistence on getting Iran and Russia on board in regards to any decisions taken to defuse the deadlock, pointed either to his fear that these two countries could jeopardize a potential deal or to a one last effort to make sure he has friends in the region. Since Karzai's administration received both monetary and moral support in different forms from countries in the region, it will be interesting to see how the Ghani-Abdullah government deals with the arrangements in place. For example, will the new government continue accepting Iran's secret funds to Afghanistan's National Security Council?² Both Ghani and Abdullah are seen much closer to the US and its allies than Karzai. Ghani's decision to sign the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) on the second day in the office – something Karzai refused to do – was a strong indication of the emphasis Ghani puts on Afghanistan's relations with the West. He appears to have subsequently come to an agreement with the US government to use a lax timetable for the withdrawal of the international military forces from Afghanistan.

Whatever the nature of Karzai administration's dealings with the regional powers, the new government certainly looks to redefine some of these relations. Involvement of the regional countries in the lengthy electoral process, past affiliations of the new leaders and ideological inclinations will dictate the nature of the relations of Afghanistan with the region in the post-Karzai era.

1.2. The New Government's Early Decisions

Securing a Long-term Relationship with the US

President Ashraf Ghani did not waste any time in securing a relationship which he assumes guarantees survival of the Afghan state. The new government signed the Bilateral Security Agreement (BSA) with the US – a long-standing demand of the latter – as well as the Status of Forces Agreement³ with NATO.

The two deals were seen as a necessity for the safeguard of the current Afghan state both inside Afghanistan and in the wider region (with the exception of Pakistan and Iran). Even China and Russia consider US support to Afghanistan as a crucial element in regional stability. According to President Vladimir Putin, the US and its allies are essentially defending the interests of countries such as Russia in Afghanistan. Afghanistan remains the last place where interests of Russia and the West converge. That has not changed despite the divergences in other scenarios i.e. Syria and Ukraine.

The move to sign the BSA was obviously welcomed by the Afghan elite, whilst the Taliban and other anti-government forces were quick to

2. See: http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/24/world/asia/24afghan.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

3. More details can be found at: http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_113393.htm

condemn it. Iran, despite its opposition to the deal, has refrained from taking any actions to jeopardize its relationship with the Afghan government. Whether the new government will remain committed to the strategic partnership agreement with Iran signed by the Karzai government is anyone's guess now.

Ghani's "Government within the Government"

President Ghani was quick to make a statement on what could be expected from his government. He merged the office of the Chief of Staff with the powerful Office of the Administrative Affairs and appointed a close ally as the head of the new office of the president. Under Karzai, the aforesaid offices were highly politicized and individuals from almost all political groups were accommodated in the setup. Ghani has purged both from many powerful individuals to ensure total control. Subsequently, Ghani appointed former minister of interior, Haneef Atmar, and the former minister of finance, Hazrat Omar Zakhelwal, as the National Security and Chief Economic Advisors respectively. Atmar and Ghani go a long way back but they also had a fallout because of Atmar's support for Karzai in the 2009 presidential election. There are reports that the US played a key role in bringing the two back together.

Ghani's prompt decision-making had taken some people by surprise, until his pace was checked by the ongoing deadlock over the appointment of cabinet positions. It is reported that at one point Abdullah complained to Karzai about being sidelined by Ghani. Ghani's plan seems clear. He worked through a network of advisors, bypassing the stagnant bureaucracy when he was made the Minister of Finance in 2003. An observer remarked recently to the author that it was assumed that Ghani would give the future cabinet only a nominal role and run the government through his advisors. This means a very small and closed circle will be running the affairs of the government, making it more difficult for the countries of the region to exert influence in the new government than it was under Karzai, and that those who forge a relationship with the individuals in Ghani's close circle will enjoy unprecedented access to the President. This partly explains the latter's decision to do business without a cabinet in the first one hundred days of his government. Nonetheless, there is now not only a great deal of pressure coming from different quarters to form the cabinet, but also the arrangement thus far has failed to ignite any reform – even day-to-day management has suffered.

2. Socio-Economic issues

2.1. Economic Slowdown and Empty Coffers

As anticipated, Afghanistan's economy has slowed down considerably as a result of the gradual decrease of international funding. The country's economy grew by 3.1 percent in 2013 compared to 14.4 percent the previous year⁴. Domestic revenue decreased to US\$ 5 billion this year. The coffers of the Ministry of Finance are empty, which has translated into its inability to pay the salaries of civil servants for some time now. Although NATO countries have pledged to provide US\$ 5.1 billion annu-

4. The World Bank "Afghanistan Economic Update", October 2013. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/16656/820120WPOWB0Af0Box0379855B00PUBLIC0.pdf?sequence=1>

ally for Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) until 2017, the Afghan government is already crumbling under the weight of a bubble economy that has heavily been dependent on the service industry created around the foreign security forces present in the country.

As indicated in CIDOB's previous reports, a rise in unemployment⁵ is likely to have ramifications with regional implications⁶. One of them will be the outpouring of young people to the neighboring countries in search of jobs. The trend is already picking up with the Afghans topping the list of asylum seekers in the OECD countries. Capital flight is also expected to continue unabated. Turkey, for example, has become an attractive destination as of late for Afghan middle class to invest in properties. Will the economic slowdown result in increased narco-trafficking and criminal activities? This question can only be answered once the bulk of the international military forces leave the country.

3. Ethnicity and Sectarianism

3.1. Ethnic Tensions as a Result of the Election

Afghanistan's violent history of ethnic strife was the reason for the international community to try to forge a government that represented the leaders of all ethnic groups, regardless of their grim pasts. Former President Hamid Karzai was also a champion of this idea. This year's presidential election saw all candidates carefully balance their teams to ensure ethnic representation of some level, even if nominal. It was very clear from the beginning that ethnic affiliations will count.

In both rounds, President Ghani managed to do well in the Pashtun and Uzbek-dominated areas. Abdullah, on the other hand, received majority of the votes of the Tajiks and Harazas. In order to balance his ticket further, Ghani courted the support of former vice president, Ahmad Zia Massoud, brother of the late Ahmad Shah Massoud, who comes from a prominent Tajik family.

Although, on the face of it, both tickets looked balanced, ethnically-charged rhetoric came out of both camps from time to time. And while elections are divisive in nature, the latest round in Afghanistan made ethnic fissures in the country more visible. Now, it is down to President Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah to mend these divisions. Should they fail to do so, some countries in the region will attempt to exploit the divisions in order to further their interests, as is evident from examples in the past.

4. Insurgency

4.1. An Intensified Insurgency

As anticipated by a number of observers, the Taliban intensified their violent campaign this year. They also used tactics which they had abstained from using in the past. Several districts in the south, north and northeast of the country saw frontal wars after a long time. Wary of incurring unnecessary

5. See: http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/stap_rp/perspectives_2013_2014/sources_of_tension_in_afghanistan_pakistan_perspectives_from_the_region_in_2013_5_afghanistan
6. See: http://www.cidob.org/en/publications/stap_rp/policy_research_papers/afghanistan_the_regional_powers_an_overview_of_2013

casualties against a superior opponent – the international military forces – Taliban’s favorite tactics have been roadside and suicide bombings. As the Afghan forces rushed to fill the void left by their international allies, the Taliban opened several simultaneous fronts in the war. The Afghan forces were constrained by President Karzai’s decision not to allow aerial bombings by the NATO forces. The Taliban, however, have failed to achieve a significant success on the battlefield. It is assumed that their decision to intensify the war has as much to do with gaining a better bargaining position in the peace talks, as with securing more spatial presence in the country.

The ANSF, on the other hand, has incurred the highest number of losses this year since 2001. The ANSF’s survival is as dependent on popular support as it is on the foreign funding. While Afghan elites, including religious scholars, have rallied behind the ANSF in recent years, the new president has taken a harder line against the Taliban than his predecessor. President Ghani has stated that he has the responsibility to protect the ANSF and will hand down severe punishments to those implicated in harming the ANSF personnel⁷. For now, it seems Taliban may have lost a golden opportunity to negotiate a favorable deal with the previous government. If President Ghani reaps rewards for the stricter policy, a peaceful settlement favoring the Taliban may become a distant prospect.

The Taliban’s cause may further be hampered by China’s changing position towards violent Islamist enterprises in the region. UAE’s inclusion of the Taliban and the Haqqani Network in the list of banned terrorist groups and the recent arrest of two Haqqani network senior leaders in Bahrain⁸ may also point to a change in attitude in the region. In the past, authorities in the Gulf had turned a blind eye to Taliban’s presence and their fundraising activities in their countries. Taliban representatives’ recent trip to China may indicate that the countries in the region – barring Pakistan – would like the Movement to enter some kind of a political arrangement with the Kabul Administration so that they can deal with irreconcilable elements of their own i.e. the East Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM). Sensing this change in the region, the Taliban leadership may be tempted to intensify violence to lay a claim for a bigger prize. However, cracks within the Taliban movement may have also caused the recent upsurge. There are credible reports of Taliban leadership’s losing grip over local commanders, a new generation of radical individuals who have more confidence in a military triumph than a settlement with the Kabul Administration. In that, talks and an eventual deal with the Taliban leadership becomes a tricky proposition for the Afghan government. If the Taliban leadership fails to obtain a “good” deal, the war will continue. Contingencies such as the death of Taliban’s spiritual leader, Mulla Omar, as reported by some media outlets, will also have a profound effect on the movement’s future direction.

5. The Regional Powers

5.1. China

Recent attacks deep inside China are an indication any country could be a victim of terrorism⁹. At the beginning of the year, China’s interest in Afghanistan was not great and there were no signs of any changes in its

7. See (in Dari only): <http://president.gov.af/fa/news/38728#>

8. See: <http://online.wsj.com/articles/haqqani-leaders-detained-in-persian-gulf-not-inside-afghanistan-1413733878>

9. See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-26402367>

policy in the short run. In China's foreign relations calculus, Afghanistan neither provided major economic returns nor was it seen as an important geostrategic country. China has done well in keeping a consistent stance pertaining to Afghanistan: it does not want the latter to relapse into a full-blown civil war, nor is it prepared to see a country completely in the realm of American influence. Thus, it always lends support to the development of Afghanistan and urges respect for its national sovereignty, at the same time.

In the light of the above, the visit of the Chinese Foreign Minister to Kabul early this year came as a surprise. Subsequently, China unexpectedly upped the tempo of its diplomatic activities in relation to Afghanistan. China planned, postponed and then finally hosted the "Heart of Asia-Istanbul Process" ministerial meeting last October¹⁰. It seems to have finally swerved from its traditional hands-off policy from "*the graveyard of empires*". However, the suspicion still remains that China is ready to negotiate with the Taliban in the future, in order to ensure the security of its economic interests in Afghanistan. On the other hand, the Chinese government has accepted to train a limited number of Afghan police personnel in its country; is conducting a joint project with the US government to train Afghan diplomats; and provides moral and material support to the Kabul Authorities.

As interaction between China and Afghanistan increased progressively through the year, China's decision to appoint a Special Envoy for Afghanistan further strengthened the view that China was getting more involved in Afghanistan. Latest assertions from Beijing indicate that China – like Russia – is clearly concerned about the prospect of another implosion of the Afghan state. China's domestic problems in Xinjiang¹¹ finally seem to have a telling affect on its policy towards Afghanistan. It has radically increased its diplomatic efforts in relation to Afghanistan. Nonetheless, this could also be down to its attempts to make this year as "*China's year of diplomacy*"¹². Assigning a Special Envoy to Afghanistan seems to indicate otherwise though. Some Chinese newspapers are also reporting closer stance between Kabul and Beijing on the question of extremist groups. ETIM and the latest upsurge in the violence in China have seemingly made the Chinese abandon their indifferent position vis-à-vis Afghanistan in favor of a more proactive role.

Recent visits of the head of the Pakistani army and the director general of its spy agency, the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), to Kabul are seen by some as a realization by the Pakistani army's top brass that China's tolerance for Pakistani-sponsored and based Jihadi groups is waning.

5. 2. Russia

Annexation of the Crimea by Russia early this year put it at loggerheads with the West. President Hamid Karzai was quick to reveal he supported the result of the Crimean referendum. However, it had little bearing on the Russian-US cooperation in Afghanistan. In so far as Afghanistan is concerned, Russia has been a reliable partner to the countries with military presence in Afghanistan. It is in Russia's interest to see the international community provide Afghanistan with the resources and training to combat terrorism and international drug trade.

10. A brief conference report can be found at: <http://www.heartofasia-istanbulprocess.af/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Fourth-HoA-Ministerial-Conference.pdf>

11. See: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-29373158>

12. As claimed here: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/07/can-china-lead-the-push-for-afghan-stability/>

With the Ukrainian conflict still raging, Russia has a difficult balancing act to follow between its cooperative policy on Afghanistan with the US and its allies and major differences in places like Syria and Ukraine. Russia is extremely concerned the Afghan government, like the Iraqi one, may considerably weaken or even completely collapse once the NATO forces are withdrawn. That may make the country once again a terrorist safe heaven, creating a new security challenge for Russia and the Central Asian Republics. This vulnerability has prompted Russia to take a much more proactive role in multilateral and bilateral mechanisms of interaction on and with Afghanistan. The Afghan presidential election presented another uncertainty. Realizing this, former President Hamid Karzai consistently conveyed the message to both Russia and China that the next Afghan government would continue his policies towards these two powers.

At the same time though, Russian authorities – President Vladimir Putin in particular – continued criticism of the American policy globally but also in relation to Afghanistan. However, they emphasized the fact that in Afghanistan their interests converged with those of the US and its allies. Russia and the Central Asian states are alarmed¹³ by the increase in violence in Afghanistan. The rapid rise of the IS in Iraq and Syria has increased the urgency on the part of the former Soviet Union states to develop solid options to blunt any threats directed at them by the Islamic extremist groups. Despite Russia-West's relations being at the lowest level, Russia's government, President Putin in particular, is keen for the West to stay engaged in Afghanistan. President Hamid Karzai's reported insistence¹⁴ on the importance of the involvement of Russia and Iran in breaking the electoral impasse is interpreted by Afghan observers as Russia and Iran's actively supporting – even funding – different political groups in the country, with a view of using these groups against the Taliban and the international Islamist syndicates in the event of the fragmentation of the Afghan state.

5. 3. India

India's commitment to a politically stable, economically independent and militarily strong Afghanistan is well evident from its projects in Afghanistan and the level of importance it attaches to its relations with the Afghan state. Continued funding, frequency of visits and meetings and support to the Afghan government on different fora all point to the fact that India has been firmly behind the Afghan state.

India's decision to fund procurement of Russian weapons for the Afghan security forces is yet the strongest indication of its ongoing commitment to strengthen the Afghan state. With the Chabahar Port agreement in its final stages, India is looking to expand its economic relations with Central Asia through Iran and Afghanistan.

Continuing on the past few years, India remained Afghan government's closest ally in the region this year. India's new government relaxed the visa regime for Afghans visiting India and gifted a huge flag of Afghanistan to the outgoing President Karzai. The highlight of their support was their pledge to provide US\$ 100 million for upgrading the Iranian port of Chabahar to enhance Afghanistan's connectivity to the rest of the world.

13. See: <http://www.rferl.org/content/central-asia-afghanistan-threat/26607887.html>

14. Sources from Daily 8am – Afghanistan's most popular newspaper – report on Karzai's insistence on consulting Russia and Iran. It is worth mentioning that Daily 8am had close links with Karzai's National Security Advisor, Rangin Dadfar Spanta. See the report at: <https://www.facebook.com/8am.af/posts/782364145140806>

It will be interesting to see how India responds to the events unfolding in Afghanistan, as its new government looks to forge even closer relations with Afghanistan. Some concerns have recently surfaced in India about the reliability of the current Afghan government as a close ally, compared to the previous one. Appointment of Ajit Kumar Doval as the new National Security Advisor¹⁵ may point to a harder line against the Pakistani-based terrorist groups by the new Indian government. The more hawkish the Indians, the more relieved the Afghan Authorities will be. It also means that overtures by the current Pakistani government to normalize relations with India may fall flat. Already besieged by domestic pressures, this will be another blow to the PML-N (Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz) government in Pakistan.

5. 4. Iran

Iran remains close to the Afghan government but still maintains links with political groups independent of official channels. The rumor in Kabul prior to and during the election was that Iran had spent millions of dollars to buy loyalty from different camps. The majority of this money was said to be aimed at supporting Dr. Abdullah Abdullah's bid. It may be part of the wider Iran-Saudi Arabia proxy war game, in which each has attempted to outbid the other.

Despite the relative thaw in relations between Iran and the West, Iran is still adamant that Afghanistan remains under the US occupation. The Iranian government, nonetheless, takes an exception to the Afghan government, which it considers a partner both in trade and in the fight against the Sunni extremists with links to – or, at least, presumably funded by – the Saudis. In the larger Iran-Saudi regional conflict, Afghanistan has not featured very prominently yet. However, Saudi Arabia's recent funneling of US\$1.5 billion to Pakistan is widely believed to be linked to Pakistan's willingness to support Saudi's designs in places like Syria. The Pakistani *jihadi* machinery, with renewed funding, risks engulfing the whole region in more violence, especially now that according to some analysts there appears to be more compelling evidence that Pakistani military's involvement with Al Qaeda may run much deeper than previously thought.

All in all, relations between Afghanistan and Iran remained cordial throughout the year. Despite reports in Kabul that Iran and Russia were behind further complicating the election impasse, the highest echelon of the Iranian government continued to reiterate that it would respect the result of the election and that it was prepared to cooperate and even expand relations with the incoming government.

5. 5. Saudi Arabia

Despite Afghanistan's continued efforts and President Ghani's choice of Saudi Arabia for his first foreign trip, Riyadh remained to be the most disengaged of the regional powers in the Afghan affairs until the signing of the agreement for establishing an Islamic studies center, a mosque and a university late in the year. The construction of the complex is estimated to cost a staggering US\$ 100 million. The mosque alone will be big enough to accommodate 10 to 20 thousand worshipers at a time.

15. More about Doval at: <http://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ajit-doval-giant-among-spies-reports-back-for-duty-soon/article1-1223709.aspx>

Despite the regional conflict between the Sunni Saudi and Shi'a Iran and Middle East being awash with violence in which these two countries are implicated, Saudi Arabia has in fact played a very benign role in Afghanistan, compared to that of Iran.

In the Afghan peace and reconciliation process, Qatar has clearly overtaken Saudi Arabia in playing a role to the dismay of the Karzai government that saw Saudi Arabia as a more reliable partner. President Ghani's government has already made overtures to the Saudi authorities for becoming more involved in the process, the response is yet to materialize. If, as it is reported, Taliban representatives' trip from Doha to China was indeed conducted with the consent of President Ghani, that would signal a shift in the Afghan policy towards not only Qatar but also the peace process at large. President Karzai did not tolerate US's lead or facilitation of the process, thus, suspecting Qatar as well. President Ghani may be open to either Qatar or Saudi Arabia playing the role of the facilitator, as long as there is progress in restarting the talks.

During President Ghani's trip to Saudi Arabia, there was also talk of a strategic cooperation agreement between the two countries. It remains to be seen what the final product will entail to assess what the future role of Saudi Arabia in Afghanistan will be.

6. Conclusion

All in all, Afghanistan is truly experiencing transitions in all spheres, testing the resolve and capacity of both the Afghan government and its international backers. In spite of that, progress has been made and the nascent Afghan institutions and the political leadership of the country have shown considerable resilience. In the troops contributing countries, America's "good war" may not be perceived so good anymore, it is not considered bad either. Therefore, public opinion has not gone wildly against continued support to and presence of troops in Afghanistan. The region, on the other hand, is particularly promising, despite the upheavals of the past year in Syria, Iraq and Palestine, amongst others. China's change of policy pertaining to Afghanistan could prove as a watershed moment in resolving the Afghanistan quagmire.

Looking ahead, there is still potential for the new Afghan government to get its act together by not only ensuring politics remains as the preferential terrain for resolving conflicts in the view of major political groups, but also conduct some necessary reforms to keep the Afghan public relatively content and the international community interested.

The stalled peace talks with the Taliban may or may not resume – its chances of success are slim in the short run. However, the important lesson the Afghan political leadership should draw from the ongoing war should be that the longer the war rages, the dirtier it gets and the more predatory the Taliban become. The Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), on the other hand, has a better chance of improving with time, as there are both domestic and international oversight and inspection mechanisms to ensure they do not derail. Arguably, no other military entity – state or non-state – in the past 40 years has enjoyed the level of societal and political support that the ANSF does now. That is the opportunity its leadership should seize.

In order to continue on the path of democratization – however bumpy – it is important to keep the current constitutional order intact. For President Ghani and Abdullah, it is imperative to make the NUG work and, at the same time, to reform electoral institutions to ensure credible elections in the future. The fate of the current Afghan state rests on the outcomes of future elections. This year's parliamentary elections could either be an opportunity or a potential threat, depending on how they are conducted and how they are perceived by the Afghan public and by donor countries. Another potential threat to the constitutional order is the presence of spoilers. Should President Hamid Karzai attempt – and succeed – to make a comeback as the head of the state, the future of democracy in Afghanistan will be at stake. Therefore, the NUG's biggest challenge would be to keep all the political players on board, yet keep their actions in check.

Regionally, balancing the competing interests of countries of the region in Afghanistan ought to be a priority. President Karzai was relatively successful in establishing functioning relationships with both the US and Iran in spite of their rivalry. He, however, failed to strike a balance between the interests of India and Pakistan, resulting in the latter appearing to feel threatened and marginalized. Whether the current government does better than the previous one is anyone's guess but if President Ghani and Abdullah can manage to do that, it will prove a monumental success.

Afghanistan's Western backers – both their public and their political leaders – have demonstrated considerable patience with developments in Afghanistan. The new government's real challenge will be to sustain this level of goodwill in the Western capitals. To do so, there is a need for a more robust and sustained diplomatic effort. In that regard, the appointment of a capable Minister of Affairs is pivotal, as is the appointment of strong ambassadors to key Western capitals. Afghanistan's donors would also like to see reform of state institutions to make them more transparent, responsive and accountable. Expectations have gone up amongst the donors in this regard, because of Ghani's reputation as a clean politician. Managing these expectations should be a key priority for the NUG, as reform will not come easily and quickly. Finally, the Afghan government has to show some movement towards economic self-sustainability. Expanding the revenue base should be on the top of the government's economic agenda. Foreign funding can dwindle or vanish altogether at any time, and as things stand, without it, the current Afghan state will find it difficult to survive.

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